



The
Magic
in this **Other World**
is **Too Far Behind!**

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Gamei Hitsuji
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The Magic in this Other
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Kuchiba *Hatsumi*

“...HUH?”





contents

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5

Prologue

The Third Hero

Chapter 1

To the Saadias Alliance

Chapter 2

Relation of the Summoned

Chapter 3

On the Evening of the New Moon

Chapter 4

Hunt the Moon

Epilogue

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Prologue: The Third Hero

A black sea was once again washing over the horizon. A black sea that was really a swarm of living beings. They were the enemies of humanity, the embodiment of evil devoted to the destruction of anything and everything. They were demons.

The wasteland below of dirt and sparse greenery was trampled by the black power that clad the demons. Like a piece of cloth as it slowly soaked in dye, they seeped ever forward. Standing atop a hill with an unbroken view at the south end of the Norfolk wastelands of the Alliance, the Alliance's hero, Kuchiba Hatsumi, was observing this situation.

Once in a while, a refreshing, dry breeze would blow in gently from the north, typical for the area. What was carried on the wind, however, was a sensation that felt like it pierced and numbed one's skin. The reason for it was undoubtedly the demons' bloodthirst and impatience. It was like a sea breeze of their desperation.

They were left in an unfavorable position after their last battle. They were practically cornered now. After being abandoned by the rest of their forces, the writing was on the wall for them. And so, in order to regain their honor, they were trying to even the score a little by rushing in while gripped by the madness of inevitable death.

Keenly sensing that battle was steadily approaching, Hatsumi looked over her shoulder. Behind her, as if hiding themselves within the forest, were the companions she'd made when she was summoned over, as well as the soldiers of the Alliance. To her right was the martial artist from the Alliance country of Larsheem, Gaius Forvan. To her left was the female mage from the self-governed state, Selphy Fittney. And right behind her, kneeling down like he was calmly meditating, was the swordsman who served as the prince of the Alliance's sovereign state of Miazen, Weitzer Ryerzen.

These three names were known far and wide across the northern continent, for they were all valorous warriors who possessed skills the people praised. Skills that were already well

proven. They had engaged in battle with the demons four times so far. And each and every time, they had entrusted their lives to each other and cooperated perfectly.

After Hatsumi nodded to the three of them as if signaling them, Gaius returned a hearty smile as he struck his chest, Selphy quietly nodded back, and Weitzer stood up with a stalwart air about him. After confirming their determination one last time, Hatsumi leaped off the top of the hill.

She spoke no words to signal the beginning. She said nothing to rally her soldiers like a commander would. There was no need. She simply dashed straight towards the demons, and even without a single word exchanged, her companions followed her. As fellow followers of the sword, their wills were all as one.

Thus, she ran down the hill without even looking behind her. She was plunging downwards head-first. The steeply inclined slope that would normally make anyone uneasy to run along was a mere trifle before her body, blessed by the divine protection from the hero summoning. Darting forward at a tremendous speed, she blazed down the hillside. The companions and soldiers behind her saw her as the vanguard, and followed in her fervor. That was why there was not a single person among them who felt uneasy, anxious, or apprehensive.

While maintaining her speed, she came down at the demon army spread out over the wastelands and cut right into the center of their formation. Taking a surprise assault from an unexpected direction, their reaction was delayed and chaotic.

Kuchiba Hatsumi drew her sword. The weapon in her right hand was something she'd received from a dwarven blacksmith. Made of the materials of legends, it was a rare beauty forged with techniques of fancy and fantasy—an uchigatana. It was a long, mithril sword with a blade nigh 120 centimeters long.

With Hatsumi's talent in wielding the silver luster of the blade, the demons before her were just like thin sheets of paper. Whether iron or flesh, anything that stood against her was so swiftly and cleanly split in two that it left no grease or blood on her blade.

She just had to swing it. By moving her body, her sword and arm were as one. Once she gave herself over to it, there was no way she would ever lose. And swing her sword was exactly what she did in the midst of the panicked demon army. The demon standing before her was cleaved right in two. And then following the flow of

the strike, she rotated her body and sent the head of another demon flying.

Weitzer and Gaius swooped down on the demons on either side of her. The martial artist's fist and the swordsman's slash annihilated several of them. Soon, after cutting down all the nearby demons and clearing an opening in the black sea, they raised a battle cry. Though belated, the unit parted to the left and right. The swordsmen cut into the stretched-out flank of the demons. The demons were completely divided. Seeing this happen, magic support came pouring down from the rear.

The mage unit commanded by Selphy was dealing the finishing blow to the divided demons just as planned. Before long, the demons, who'd had their formation completely destroyed, were bitterly crushed according to plan by Hatsumi and her troops. When the initial strike went well, all that was left was to follow through.

Perhaps because the demons' formation had been destroyed, or perhaps because they weren't exactly team players to begin with, they no longer cooperated as they fought. The demons lashed out with their own strength. Things quickly devolved into a melee, with each demon fighting for themselves. Such grandstanding while fighting would prove to be a fatal mistake.

All Hatsumi and her companions had left to do from here was to cut out the source of the infection. Unlike the demons, the hero's team stood firm like a rock. And it didn't take long for the problem to come to them. A demon whose status was an order of magnitude higher than the others approached Hatsumi. It was the demon general. Holding a sword clad in mana in one hand, it appeared to be a skinny demon swordsman wearing an overcoat. If she remembered correctly, his name was Mauharior. Calling himself the Violent Flickering Wind, he'd allegedly beheaded many of the Alliance's soldiers with his sword skills.

"Hero of the Alliance!"

The demon's roaring, thunderous voice—far more than what anyone would expect from his slender frame—washed over them. Shaking the wastelands, it kicked up and blew away the sand in the area. Just at the sound of his voice, the movements of the Alliance soldiers became dull. It must have affected morale. Realizing the strength hidden within this monster, their spirits faltered. The only ones who were unfazed by the demon's roar were several of the commanders, Hatsumi, and her companions. Mere moments after

his shout, Mauhario closed the distance to Hatsumi in a flash. He wasted no time in unleashing a slash accompanied by a devilish storm.

“Take thaaat!”

“Hyaaaah!”

Matching him, Hatsumi swung her own sword. As her blade cut through the air, it made a sharp whistling sound and repelled the incoming blow. His attack deflected, Mauhario regained the distance between them in an instant. And then, in the blink of an eye, he snaked around to her left and brought his sword to task.

Raising her mithril sword to defend, the harsh sound of metal clashing against metal rang through the air. Not relenting, the demon who was taller than Hatsumi pushed down on his blade and brought the fight to a deadlock. She only had the muscles of a mere young girl, but she was able to push back against the demon thanks to the power of the blessing from the hero summoning.

“Hero of the Alliance! Today will be the day I defeat you and offer your damn head to Nakshatra-sama!”

“Ugh... Sorry, but I don’t have any intention of dying here.”

Finding his angry roar from close proximity to be rather annoying, Hatsumi slipped past Mauhario’s sword as she pushed it to the side. But then, as she went to slash at him, contrary to her expectations, Mauhario sensed the danger and broke away in the opposite direction.

Mauhario corrected his stance once he’d safely escaped the range of her blade. His movements were terrifyingly fast. So much so that they were almost incomprehensible. This demon swordsman was the type whose primary strength was speed. He always kept out of his enemy’s range. For he could leap in, close the distance, and strike in an instant. It gave him the upper hand. Indeed, it seemed that Hatsumi should be at a disadvantage like this.

Yet she offered not a word of complaint. Slightly opening up her stance, she rotated her left ankle towards her right heel and dropped her posture. Her sword was hidden behind her neck as she held it over her right shoulder. Along with the breeze in the air, she could feel its cold metal against her skin.

She estimated there were about eight meters between her and the demon general who held his sword at the ready. Her sword was just over a meter long. For such a demon who specialized in speed and charging power, this was likely the ideal distance. Seeing her

prepared to attack at any moment, a scornful and joyous expression floated up on Mauhario's face.

He judged that Hatsumi was gambling to launch herself at him, hedging her bets in a game of kill or be killed. The expression that had come over his face revealed his confidence in the outcome of this sort of match. Based on Hatsumi's estimates, if she held her blade out in front of her, she still had six meters between her and her opponent. It was a distance that her blade could never reach. But this was a trivial problem for her. On the other hand, for the demon general who didn't know any better, it was a fatal problem.

"DIIIIIIIIIE!"

The demon general let out a ferocious and violent scream, an expression of his fighting spirit. It rang through the area like a herald of his killing intent, yet Hatsumi's heart was as calm as a perfectly still pool. All the sensory information coming to her right now registered as trivial. In that moment, not the demon general's howl, not the screams of the soldiers, and not her companions' panicked cries caused a single ripple in her heart.

Then it was time for her to play her hand—The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, the Longsword of the Absolute Blade.

In the instant she abruptly opened her eyes wide, she exhaled with purpose and brandished the sword on her shoulder as if she intended to clear away every single demon on the other end of it.

In the distance behind the demon general, there was the rumbling sound of rushing wind. To the tremendous surprise of each and every being present, when Hatsumi swung her sword, the demon general's lower half tumbled gruesomely over in the blink of an eye. Debris, wind, his upper half, and a smattering of blood were blown jumbled in the opposite direction.

Without even taking a single step forward, Mauhario had tasted defeat. All that was left was silence. At least for a moment. Immediately following that were the cheers of joy raised by the soldiers. They'd witnessed and were celebrating the demon's defeat. The demons they were fighting, on the other hand, were stunned. Not only were they violently confronted with the reality that someone much stronger than them had been defeated, but first and foremost, they were completely bewildered as to how, exactly, he'd been defeated.

Having yet to actually die, Mauhario looked up at Hatsumi from the ground in surprise.

“Im... possible. The range of your sword... was surely...” he said, blood spewing from his mouth.

It was true the tip of her sword never touched the demon general's body. But just as Hatsumi had thought, that was a trivial matter. Looking down coldly at the body of the demon general who would never get up again, she flicked her sword as if removing blood from it, and replied to him.

“I thought you were a swordsman yourself. You should know better. A swordsman who can only cut things within their sword's range is, at best, second rate, no?”

Her cold declaration would send shivers down the spines of all who stood against her. But the true target of it, the demon general, was numb to the sensation. He perished then and there.



Eventually, the skirmish between the demons and humans came to an end. The Alliance claimed victory that day. The cheers of joy from the human swordsmen and mages alike could be heard from a great distance. It was proof that the fighting was over. A particular young man dressed like a knight emerged from the crowd of celebrating soldiers.

It was the prince of the Alliance's sovereign state of Miazen, one of the Seven Swords, Weitzer Ryerzen. He knelt at Hatsumi's feet when he reached her.

"Your fighting style is magnificent, Hero-dono."

"I thought I told you to stop calling me a hero already, Weitzer."

Kuchiba Hatsumi let out a disconcerted sigh upon hearing the overly serious and stubborn young man's flattery. However, he paid it no mind and took her hand in an attempt to kiss it. Perhaps it was ceremonious. Hatsumi didn't frown on the gesture itself, but for some reason, today she also pulled away her hand like it was fleeing. As Weitzer looked up at her, his shrewd expression became slightly disappointed.

"Hero-dono..."

"Like I just said, Weitzer..."

And then, from the opposite direction, Hatsumi's companion Selphy Fittney called out to them.

"I'm afraid there's no helping it, Hatsumi. You are, in fact, a hero after all."

"You too, Selphy...?"

"Even if such a thing bothers you, you cannot change the truth."

"Ugh..."

As Selphy drew her conclusion in a taciturn tone, Hatsumi let out a groan. Selphy was wearing a pale green robe with the hood pulled over her eyes. She truly looked like a mage. But from under that hood, stifled laughter was beginning to leak out. Hatsumi then noticed that at some point, a large shadow had appeared behind Weitzer.

"So you were rejected again today, huh, prince?"

An awfully lively and loud voice came pouring down on Weitzer. The one standing behind him who looked the part of the

brawny muscle-bound giant of the group, Gaius Forvan. He slapped Weitzer's shoulder with his hand that had an old scar carved into it. Hatsumi thought that even though they were companions, he should hold back a bit when interacting with a prince. But setting that matter aside, it seemed that he'd misinterpreted Weitzer's flattery. Weitzer looked back at Gaius with a sharp gaze and bitterly narrowed his eyes.

"...It's not that I was outright rejected."

"Oh? From what I've seen, I think that's exactly what's going on."

"Ugh..."

As Gaius tried to play innocent, Weitzer's eyes revealed just a little bit of irritation.

"I-It's not like I hate Weitzer, you know?" Hatsumi defended him. "It's just that I'm not used to being treated that way. It's not that I dislike it, per se..."

"I gotta say, you certainly looked like someone who disliked it."

"Gaius, will you be quiet? Hero-dono, I behave this way because I genuinely respect you..."

"Both of you, don't go troubling Hatsumi like that."

Selphy candidly offered an end to the conversation. However, the two men looked like they still had plenty to say. But with dissatisfied expressions, they nodded and acquiesced.

"Well... At any rate, good work everyone."

Hatsumi changed the subject and voiced her appreciation. She raised her hand to say that no reply was necessary, and her three companions nodded.

"But... it's surprising that there weren't as many as we thought there would be."

Hatsumi furrowed her brow as she spoke. It was Selphy who answered her concern.

"That's because only one of the three armies of demons showed up this time."

"As I suspected, the demon army we defeated just now was nothing but a sacrificial pawn."

Right now, there were three demon armies assaulting the Alliance. They had just defeated one of them, but there were still two remaining armies that were significantly larger than the one they'd just fought.

"It's fine, isn't it? Today's fight bodes well."

"The enemy you defeated just now was a demon general, Hero-dono. Asking for a greater military accomplishment than that would simply be aiming too high."

"But..."

"Hatsumi, leave it at that. If you say any more, then we'll all be left ashamed of what we accomplished before you came along."

"Yeah. Before you showed up, a single demon army was enough to push back the Alliance army. But as soon as you set foot on the battlefield, not only could we stand up to them, we could drive *them* back. And today..."

"We crushed one of their three armies and killed one of their generals. All because of your power, Hero-dono."

"What? *All* because of that? What about the ones I defeated?"

"The fact that we were able to crush the demon army, that we were able to slay the demon general, and that you were able to defeat the other demons, Gaius, is all thanks to Hero-dono."

Hearing Weitzer's curt manner of speaking, Gaius's eyes flashed fire. Seeing that that this was probably going to turn into another fight, Hatsumi let out a sigh and tried to diffuse the situation.

"Weitzer, we only won because we prepared sufficient forces for the battle. That isn't just all thanks to me, right? Besides, the hard part is yet to come."

"...That's right, isn't it?"

The only one who spoke up in agreement was Selphy. The demons they defeated this time were led by a demon general who was the type that was confident in his own strength. He wasn't much of a commander, and mostly left his subordinates to their own devices on the battlefield. All in all, that made him a relatively easy opponent to deal with.

When Hatsumi first faced him, she was easily able to get the upper hand. But when demonic reinforcements arrived, it brought the situation back to an equilibrium. The general leading the troops who arrived was one who laid out proper plans, which made the fight much harder. If not for that, the Alliance would have reclaimed its territory much sooner. Seeing the pensive look on Hatsumi's face as she reflected on the battle, Weitzer spoke to her as if to say such a thing was unnecessary.

"As long as you're here, Hero-dono, the likes of a demon army is nothing to fear."

"Yeah. And don't forget about me."

Brimming with confidence, Gaius powerfully struck his chest like he always did. This time, not just Weitzer, but Selphy too rolled their eyes at him. In contrast to her comrades' high spirits, Hatsumi appeared slightly gloomy.

"...Hey, what do you guys think I am?" she asked before remembering an important detail. "Ah, and you can't say a hero, okay?"

Her three companions exchanged glances with each other, and then each gave their reply.

"The hero part aside, you're an extraordinarily beautiful swordswoman."

"As for race, saying you're a human would suffice."

After Gaius and Selphy gave their answers, Weitzer put his fist to his heart with an extremely serious expression and looked at Hatsumi.

"You are our princess, Hero-dono."

"Wha...?! Weitzer, that kind of thing is super embarrassing."

"Oho? What's this? It doesn't sound like you hated him saying it, little princeeeess!"

"Come on, Gaius!"

Having such embarrassing things said right to her face, Hatsumi's cheeks turned as red as the setting sun. She then immediately hung her head like she was somehow dispirited.

That wasn't what she had wanted to hear. Selphy approached and leaned in to look up at her eyes. Eyes that were racked with anxiety.

"Does not having memories make you anxious after all?"

"...Isn't it obvious? I can only remember my name and the way of the sword, you know... There's no way I wouldn't be anxious."

The hero summoned by the Alliance, Kuchiba Hatsumi, had no memory of her life before appearing in the Alliance. In other words, she had no recollection of her time before being a hero. In short, she had amnesia. She had no idea what she'd done with her life, or what she wanted to do with it in the future. The only two things that remained with her were her name, Kuchiba Hatsumi, and the sword techniques that she used. The anxiety that produced in her made her feel distant. Faraway. Like her feet weren't touching the ground. Gaius then walked up to her and slapped her shoulder in a friendly manner.

"We're here for you. Got that?"

“Yes... but...”

“Hero-dono, if you have no memories, then you can just make some together with us.”

“Weitzer...”

Yet even with Weitzer’s kind words and gentle smile, she could not shake her anxiety. Then, as if to make a public announcement, Gaius cupped both his hands around his mouth.

“Ooooooh, here we go again! Weitzer’s corny speech is starting!”

Weitzer stood behind him and quietly drew his sword from its sheath. After glancing briefly around at her companions who were still in a celebratory mood after their victory, Hatsumi looked up at the sky.

“...”

She had lost her memories. But every once in a while, she would see something in her dreams that she believed was from her life before she came to this world. The dream was always the same—it was a world full of things that didn’t exist here, and the same person was always there. But when she woke up, the dream was always vague. This only fanned her anxiety more.

There was something she must never forget, something extremely important. That feeling stabbed at her heart like a buried needle.

Chapter 1: To the Saadiaz Alliance

There was a clue regarding the hero summoning ritual in the Saadiaz Alliance.

Suimei had discovered this information in the book Felmenia had brought to him from Astel. And so, together with Felmenia, Lefille, and Liliana in tow, he departed the capital city of the Nelferian Empire, Filas Philia, and was now on a journey to the northwest of the continent where the Saadiaz Alliance was situated. Right now, they were jostling about in what wasn't technically a horse-drawn carriage headed towards the Alliance from the Empire. The beast that pulled it was a creature with large horns and long fur. That was nearly the size of an elephant. It was known as a cowhorn.

Modern magician Yakagi Suimei was sitting in the corner of the cowhorn-pulled vehicle lecturing Felmenia and Liliana about magicka. He spread out papers he had prepared across the wooden floor of the carriage while Felmenia and Liliana quietly listened to him talk. Such talks were completely over Lefille's head as she was a complete amateur on the subject matter. As such, she was sitting behind Suimei, humming a song while polishing her sword.

"...And that's about it for that topic. Shall we move on to the next?"

"Yes."

"Very... well."

Receiving assent from both Felmenia and Liliana, Suimei moved on to the next topic.

"Then, what I'll be talking about from here is liturgical reduction of magicka and its practical use. Liturgy is a technique that takes the complex processes required to use magicka and simplifies them into simple actions and short chants. Moreover, it optimizes these processes and shortens the time it takes to use magicka. It shortens long chants into abbreviated ones, takes chants which are hard to pronounce and changes them into gestures, replaces the need for complex gestures with a chant, and so on."

After pausing briefly to take a breather, Suimei continued.

"The magicka that I use with most frequency is an easy-to-understand one that uses liturgy: strike magicka. I can manifest its effects by only snapping my fingers."

"You mean this, right?"

In demonstration, Felmenia snapped her fingers. Following along, Suimei lightly snapped his fingers and sent the paper in his hand flying with a light shock.

"Whenever I've used it in this world, people are excessively surprised."

"In our world, magic is fundamentally something that is invoked by chanting a spell or keyword and requires the aid of the Elements, after all."

"Without that... using magic so simply and freely... is completely counter to the logic of magic in this world... Anyone would be surprised."

Having only touched upon magicka that defied conventional wisdom, Liliana was still unused to Suimei's new theories. She knit her brow and cocked her head to the side. She'd lived believing that chants were absolutely necessary. Being taught that that was immutable common knowledge, of course these people had never come up with something like liturgy.

"Strike magicka. Originally, the effect was manifested after chanting the spell, but reciting the chant was replaced with the action of snapping my fingers. So when I snap my fingers now, it produces the same effect as the version with the chant. It's the same spell."

The two girls were hurriedly scribbling down what Suimei was saying. After seeing that they finished writing, Suimei continued his explanation on liturgy.

"By trimming the fat, reducing the information involved, and simplifying the necessary actions, magicka becomes easier to use. Even in a situation where one is unable to speak or their movements are restricted, you can still use magicka. And this part is quite important, but magicka with many processes can also have its activation time reduced."

"How do you do that, Suimei?"

"For example, say you have a five verse chant to invoke a spell. The time it takes to chant those five verses is the time required to invoke the spell. But say we replace two of those verses with a

gesture. That way, when we recite the spell..."

"I see. The time to cast it is reduced by two verses, right?"

"That's right. That's the kind of advantage liturgy gives you."

Hearing this, Felmenia and Liliana both oohed and aahed.

"But Suimei-dono, even if you shorten the time with liturgy, it doesn't change the entropy, right?"

"Yeah, exactly."

"What do you mean, Felmenia?"

"Shortening the time it takes to cast a spell using liturgy is different from modern magicka theory where the casting time is shortened by mixing together different magicka systems. The act of chanting is just substituted with something else, which means that, in essence, nothing has really changed about the spell."

"I see..."

Suimei had previously explained this to Felmenia, and it seemed she'd properly understood it. It wasn't all that long ago that he'd begun instructing her in the ways of magicka. Her ability to grasp things so quickly made him understand why she was known as a genius mage.

"Well, those are the basics of it, but let's go back over two thousand years ago in my world. At that time, in the West, it was popular to perform speeches to fascinate the audience and persuade others. This was basically how politics were handled. It became an indispensable technique for those giving the speeches to skillfully control their intonation and so on to convince others they were speaking the truth during their speeches. There was another technique that was also important—do you know what it is?"

"If this concerns speaking, then it would be the ability to memorize the contents of the speech?"

"Yes, you're on the mark. To be specific, it's the ability to correctly pull out the memorized contents from one's head, or mnemonics."

Magicka and memorization. The two girls were unable to see the connection and were making faces like they didn't really get it. Observing this, Suimei continued his explanation.

"For example, when you're trying to memorize something, performing some other movement while doing so can make it easier to remember. When you then perform a similar action later, you remember whatever it was by association. You're familiar with this, right?"

“Yes. I have heard of this.”

“Not being able to memorize something is usually attributed to having a poor memory, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that the brain doesn’t remember it. People are able to learn things even when they are in an unconscious state, right? Simply put, not being able to remember something only means one was unable to pull from their head at the right time. In short, the actions I was talking about before are meant to support the brain and make accessing such information easier.”

After pausing once more, Suimei returned to the original topic.

“And so, mnemonics end up developing as a technique to recall memories and information in a form where they can even be incorporated into magicka. Well, to put it simply, the action helps you remember.”

Felmenia continued from where Suimei left off.

“If we hypothesize that the information stored in one’s head is like magicka, then not just with chanting, but with motion or gestures, one would be able to draw out the information from their head, no?”

“Yeah, that’s the way to think about it.”

Suimei gave a very satisfied nod to Felmenia’s comparison. And the same applied to magicka, too. By performing the same gesture practiced when memorizing a spell, one would be able to invoke it directly later on. But hearing all this, Liliana made a face like she was in pain.

“This all sounds... rather farfetched to me.”

“I’m sure it does. However, in my explanation just now, I rushed from the theory straight to its established result. There was quite a lot of research in between to connect the dots.”

“Hnnngh...”

As Suimei explained further, Liliana groaned like she still wasn’t fully convinced. Certainly what he was telling them, taken to the extreme, meant that magicka could be used just by memorizing it. Liliana was stuck on that. She knew there was no chance of manifesting something just by recalling it.

“It seems that you’re still clinging to the physical part. That materializes due to phenomena using unperceivable mystical energy, mystical vectors, and mystical laws. These are the ‘mysteries’ that we aim to dispel... Don’t worry about it. Once you start touching on it, you’ll begin to understand gradually.”

Persuading Liliana with those words, Suimei brought his lecture to an end.

“So that’s how it is. This arrangement and replacement of mystical actions, the materialization of a magicka circle, Notarikon, Temurah, and Gematria among others, are techniques to produce the ritual oneself and then analogize it. This is called liturgical reduction, or in short, liturgy.”

With that, he asked if the two of them still needed more details.

“Any questions?”

Liliana raised her hand.

“Magicka circles... The ones you use... Where the circle is suddenly drawn... I want to hear about that.”

“Sorry, I’ll save that for another time. It’s better to have a firm understanding of liturgy before moving on to the materialization of a magicka circle.”

“That’s... regrettable.”

Suimei’s response made her sulk. Liliana seemed to be quite interested in the subject.

“Next, I’ve prepared a fill in the blanks test. It has questions on the main points of everything I talked about today except for liturgy.”

As Suimei handed them sheets paper, Felmenia looked at hers with a doubtful face.

“Suimei-dono, I think it is better to learn by practical use, but... In this case, it would mean actually implementing liturgy...”

“That may be so, but we can’t put a whole lot into practical use within this carriage, right? To do that kind of thing, we need a properly prepared location. I prepared this instead because it’s convenient to do here.”

“Well, that is certainly true...”

Felmenia agreed, but she didn’t seem completely satisfied. Just as she said, this test wouldn’t really give them any proper sense for what they were learning.

“I thought you would understand faster if you thoroughly remembered the details of the theory, but... Teaching isn’t easy, huh?”

As if something heavy was sitting atop his head, Suimei hung his head low in a troubled fashion. Because he had never officially taken on students before, he was unused to tutoring. There was more or less a single exception to this, but that person was able to

use magicka considerably well beforehand and was more of an assistant who used peculiar magicka. This was the first time he'd taught anyone anything starting from the bare basics. As expected, he couldn't avoid running into difficulties here and there. Because of this, he was constantly getting feedback from his students along the way.

"All right, I'll think about something more in the line of practical use, so you guys have a go at this for now."

"Understood."

"I feel like using this pure white paper... is a waste though..."

For quite a while now, Suimei had been using white sheets of paper quite liberally. Liliana lifted one up and frowned. In this world, such paper was quite valuable. Unlike his world, this one had yet to have an industrial revolution or two. The machinery to create paper hadn't been invented yet, and no mass-production lines existed.

Is that also because of magic throwing its weight around...?

In his world, when it came to materials to scribe magic circles on, rather than generic white paper, specially manufactured parchment was judged to be better and more valuable. But in this world dominated by magic culture, it was something of the other way around.

Felmenia and Liliana started their tests in short order. Suimei then spun around on his butt and faced Lefille.

"Taking a short break?"

"We got to a checkpoint. How much longer do you think we'll be travelling by carriage?"

"The fortress on the national border should be coming into sight soon, so it shouldn't be much longer."

"It's been too long. My ass hurts after sitting on a wooden floor for three days."

"Suimei-kun, that's crass."

As Suimei made a sour face, Lefille put on a smile and flicked him lightly on the forehead.

"Ow, that smarts... Anyways, even though we're close to the border, why haven't we seen anything resembling a mountain?"

While rubbing his forehead, Suimei stuck his head out of the carriage and looked towards their destination. Just as he had said, there was no mountain range in the direction they were going. Not even a small hill. In general, most national borders used mountain

ranges or other natural markers as boundaries. It was typical to place border fortresses in the valleys that broke up the range. It was a necessity to make it difficult for neighboring countries to invade, but strangely enough, Suimei spied nothing of the sort around. While he basked in the wind and looked about the landscape skeptically, Lefille flashed a refreshing smile as if to tell him he had nothing to worry about.

“Beyond here, there is a large fissure in the earth called ‘The Valley Which Peeks Into Evil.’ It serves as the border between the Empire, the Alliance, and the self-governed state.”

“A fissure?”

“In short, it’s a deep valley carved in the earth. It’s said that it was created when the spirit who formed the counterpart of the Goddess’s servant Ishaktney lost its temper and tore open the earth.”

“I see...”

Suimei’s ears perked up. These kinds of stories tended to spike his inquisitiveness. The image of something the scale of the large belt carved across Africa came to mind.

“At its deepest sections, one is unable to see the bottom at all, so a bridge fortress was built at the shallowest section, serving as the fortress at the national border.”

“...Hmm? Does that mean there’s only a single fortress?”

“The bridge fortress belongs to the Alliance. The Empire’s fortress is basically enclosed within it. That’s what we’ll be seeing.”

Lefille gestured for a paper and pen from Suimei and then began drawing a picture to demonstrate. Across a black line which represented the fissure in the earth, she drew three bridges that connected to a single fortress. And as if to seal the path leading out, the fortress was shaped like a semi-circle around them. After the two of them talked about it briefly, Lefille remembered something and changed the topic.

“Come to think of it, before we departed, we heard a rumor that the victims of the coma incident regained consciousness, right?”

“Oh, that? It would’ve been fine if they were put to sleep a little longer, honestly...”

Suimei made a bitter face since this outcome didn’t please him. He would have preferred they stay unconscious until memories of the incident had faded around town and people put it out of their

minds. It would have been fine for the victims to stay out of people's eyes for a while.

Although, thanks to the people in the city changing their minds about Liliana, this ended up not being an absolute necessity. But still, Suimei thought it would be better if they were still unconscious—just so they couldn't try anything funny. Meanwhile, Lefille was looking at Suimei like he was a shady character for talking about the victims in a rather reprehensible manner.

"I'm reminded from time to time, but... you're quite merciless, or rather cruel, aren't you?"

"Hmm? I'm a magician, you know. I'm not a respectable human being."

"Nevertheless, I don't think that's something you should be saying."

"Well, that may be so. But it's not like I'm not selfish, especially after all this. You can tell from when I got Liliana pardoned, right? At the end of the day, I'm the type of person who doesn't care how some unrelated guy ends up groaning over my actions."

"Though wouldn't it just make people angry if you unreasonably hurt them?"

"I know that I'm being inconsistent. And I was more or less reconciled with that before coming to this world. I believe that I'm well aware of what is born from that inconsistency."

"I see."

Suimei was gazing at Lefille like he was resigned. Perhaps having grasped his sentiment, Lefille questioned him no further.

"It's about that time I faced a major setback. That thing I touched on lightly after we defeated Rajas..."

"Indeed, I'm quite interested in it. I'd like you to tell me about it next time without fail."

"I'll have to decline. I don't even wanna think about it myself."

"Heehee."

Suimei was quite puzzled to see Lefille let out a light laugh with a smile. He then moved the conversation back to the original topic and away from talk of his weaknesses that he couldn't possibly continue for his own dignity's sake.

"Well, the people of the imperial capital woke up to the truth, so Liliana should be fine anyways."

"Speaking of being fine, I wonder if Reiji-kun and the others are alright..."

Lefille casually shifted the conversation towards their absent friends. They were currently planning to stay in the Empire and had parted ways with Suimei when he left, but...

“Is there something wrong?”

“No, it’s just that they did end up raising a commotion in the imperial capital. I just have misgivings that they might be put at a disadvantage because of it.”

Lefille’s concerns were natural. Suimei had Reiji and the others take a role in resolving the coma incidents—specifically the unreasonable role of stalling Graziella and company. Things had turned out well in the end, but taking into account that they got in the way of a military police investigation and ended up having a scuffle with a princess, it was natural to worry that they might now find themselves in a precarious situation in the Empire. However, Suimei, who was responsible for it in the first place, looked surprisingly unconcerned.

“Suimei-kun?”

“Yeah, that’ll all somehow work out. Before we left, I played my hand after all.”

“Did you do something?”

“Well, yeah. An eentsy-teensy simple something.”

Suimei was pressing and separating his thumb and index finger on one hand while flashing a small, crafty smile like a brat playing a prank.

“I see. If you’ve done something, then there isn’t a problem.”

Hearing that Suimei had dealt with it, Lefille’s concerns were cleared away and she returned a relieved nod to his impish smile. Like that, the two of them amused themselves as they continued chatting for a while before Felmenia raised her hand with great urgency.

“Suimei-dono! I have finished writing my answers!”

“Oh, you’re already done?”

Looking at Felmenia’s eager smile, Suimei drew nearer and collected her test.

“Hmm, hmm... Well, it’s filled in nicely. Liliana, how are you doing?”

“Just... a little more.”

As one would expect, this was still quite difficult for Liliana who only just started studying magicka. While wrinkling her brow and groaning, she was laboriously scribbling away. The sight of her

trying so hard was rather charming. Meanwhile, after receiving well over a passing mark from Suimei, Felmenia flashed a grand smile as she started to appeal to him for something.

“Suimei-dono! Suimei-dono!”

“What is it?”

“If you think I have done well, then please praise me!”

“Huh? Wha?”

Suimei was completely bewildered, but Felmenia looked rather expectant. If she had dog ears and a tail, her ears would surely be pointed straight up and her tail would surely be wagging furiously. As he sidled up to her like he was about to tease her, something suddenly yanked on the back of Suimei’s collar vigorously.

“—Gueh!”

An unflattering shriek escaped from Suimei’s mouth. Before he knew what was happening, Lefille had grabbed the back of his collar and was gripping it tightly. Even though he hadn’t actually done anything yet... As Suimei looked at Lefille to imply exactly that, she focused her gaze in Felmenia’s direction.

“Wh-What are you doing, Lefille?! Are you trying to get in my way?!”

“Yes, that’s right. Lady Felmenia, you’re clinging to Suimei-kun a little too much.”

“Th-That’s not particularly...”

Felmenia was at a loss for words. Lefille then continued as if pushing in for an answer.

“You can’t say that you haven’t been. You’ve been sticking to Suimei-kun at every single opportunity, haven’t you?”

“I-It is not like I particularly have an ulterior motive!”

“Even so, it’s not allowed. I can’t overlook it.”

As they talked, their gazes clashed. Suimei winced as he watched all this. Felmenia suddenly began waving her hand around in a panic.

“Just what is wrong with it?! When you were small, did you not also spend a lot of time with Suimei-dono?! Besides, you were having fun with him all to yourself just now!”

“I-I was just casually talking to Suimei-kun about our plans from here on out! It was nothing more or less than that!”

“Same for me!”

“I still object! Right now, your wicked thoughts are completely transparent! Just get away already!”

“I will NOT!”

In the middle of throwing her tantrum, Felmenia made a leap forward. Naturally, she was diving for Suimei rather than Lefille.

“Menia, what’re you—?!”

“What on earth?!”

Suimei was completely flustered as Felmenia clung to him like an unrelenting vise.

“Suimei-dono! Please praise me!”

“Lady Felmenia! You can receive praise without having to do this kind of thing, right?! Stop this disgraceful behavior at once!”

Lefille pulled on the collar she was still holding and tried to tear Suimei away. On the other hand, Suimei, who was now being yanked on and climbed on, tried to mediate between the two of them, but...

“C-Calm down! Both of you, just step ba... Bwuh?!”

With Felmenia clinging to him, her bountiful chest was pressing against him. It was unexpectedly soft and pleasant, and utterly disarming. Once he became conscious of it, Suimei was completely flustered.

“Wait, this is bad! Hey, Menia! This is really bad! Really, extremely bad, so get away quickly!”

This situation was bad for Suimei as a teenage boy. However, being completely ignorant of this, Felmenia looked at him with teary eyes and sniffled.

“Suimei-donooo! Even you want me to get away?”

“Don’t grumble about it! What’s with you?! L-Lefi, help me out here...”

“If Lady Felmenia is going to resort to this, then I can too...”

“Wha?! Lefille-san?! How did it end up like this?!”

Lefille pressed herself up against Suimei’s back with her hands on his shoulders. She was completely glued to him. Being assaulted from both the front and back, the three of them were now all bunched together.

“Wai— Both of you?! This is painful! Painful, I tell you!”

Suimei was no longer able to endure it and yelled out, but the two of them weren’t listening to him at all as they held on to his body like their lives depended on it. Discerning that it was useless to try to talk the two of them down, he quickly resorted to turning to a third party to escape this crisis.

“Liliana! Save me!”

Suimei earnestly appealed to her, but...

"Suimei, this is what people mean... when they say... 'If you cut somebody, you will wet your own body with blood.'"

"What's with that?!"

"It's a proverb... from this world."

Suimei guessed it meant roughly the same thing as getting one's just deserts. But that was all Liliana had to say as she otherwise ignored his plea. She was still focused on her test and didn't even look at him.

"Hey, wait, you're not gonna save me?!"

"I'm still... busy."

"No way! Helping me just a little won't put you out, right?!"

As Suimei kept hounding her, Liliana let out a deliberately loud exasperated sigh. And then...

"Suimei... The moment Lefille returned to her original form... this was inevitable. It... should've been obvious. Not being able to deal with it despite that... is squarely your fault."

"In what way was this obvious?!"

"That part of you... is just like the Colonel..."

In the end, Liliana criticized Suimei as she looked at him with a half-closed eye. Meanwhile, Felmenia and Lefille's battle was still continuing.

"Suimei-dono!"

"Suimei-kun!"

"I got it! I got it, so both of you calm down a little! If you keep causing a ruckus, it'll bother the other passengers!"

In the end, Felmenia and Lefille kept at it until they arrived at the fortress on the national border.



In the northwest region of the continent, though the temperature was cold enough for it to be winter, there wasn't the dampness or dryness one would expect of the season. The climate was at a relative equilibrium and the weather was quite calm. However, it was said that dragons lived in the craggy mountains and forests filled with black trees. A great deal of the terrain here was too harsh for people to live in, so compared to other countries, the amount of land untouched by human hands was considerably larger.

After disembarking from the cowhorn-drawn vehicle at the national border, Suimei and his party crossed the bridge, and without any problems, were let through the fortress on the Alliance side. They were now visiting their first town in the first country they came to of the Saadiaz Alliance. Clouds were scattered about overhead. It wasn't quite a perfectly clear sky, but it was just as pleasing to the eye and just as pleasant to travel under. The blowing wind was chilly, despite it being the season of this world's calendar where it should be quite hot, so it was rather relaxing.

The town they found themselves in was quite unlike the imperial capital and the other towns of the Empire where houses were colored based on their district. So without any sort of system to their coloring, the buildings here were vibrant. Even their shapes varied with their triangular, flat, and even gabled roofs. Overall, it gave the town a fun and gentle atmosphere. The space between houses was also quite wide, and there was a generous amount of vegetation planted between them. The flat shaved stone that made up the sidewalks was visible once in a while, but there seemed to be more greenery than stone anywhere you went. It was perhaps because they were only in a remote town far away from the country's city center, but Suimei's impression of the Alliance so far was that it gave off more of a pastoral feeling than a fantasy one.

"So this is an Alliance town..."

Looking at the ornaments decorating the buildings all about the town as well as at the people going about their daily lives, Suimei was somewhat enchanted. The Alliance appeared to be different from both Astel and Nelferia in several ways. As if to confirm his impression, Liliana chimed in.

"To be precise... this town is in the Alliance nation of Grafille. The Alliance is unlike Astel, Nelferia, and the self-governed state... in that it's made up of a collective of five different countries."

"So this is just part of the Alliance, huh?"

While talking about such things with Liliana, Suimei casually glanced to his side and spotted Felmenia looking around excitedly at their surroundings just like he was. Suimei couldn't help but call out to his fellow comrade who was entranced by the appearance of the houses and the mana lamps hanging along the roads.

"Feels different to you too, huh, Menia?"

"Ah, yes. This is my first time in the Alliance, so I was just a little curious... At any rate, the Alliance is quite different from Astel

and Nelferia, don't you think?"

Felmenia became somewhat bashful upon realizing her childlike excitement had been exposed. Liliana then stepped in to explain the nature of the nation.

"Since long ago... the Alliance people have strived to live in harmony with nature and the local flora and fauna. So unlike the Empire... they don't specialize in construction or manufacturing. But the Alliance feels somewhat relaxing... I like it."

Certainly, it seemed like a place where the people had an appreciation for nature. The same went for Liliana, who stretched her arms out wide to either side and took a deep breath. In fact, everyone here—even the locals—seemed like they were taking it all in and relaxing. Suimei then looked at Lefille. She had a composed appearance that wasn't all that different from her usual self.

"But it doesn't seem like it's your first time here, huh, Lefi?"

"No, it's not. I recall visiting the Alliance as a child."

"So it hasn't really changed since then?"

"Not really. I believe that time flows as it pleases in places like the Alliance, so I don't think much at all has changed."

Lefille slightly raised the brim of her wide hat as she spoke. Perhaps she was feeling nostalgic about her first visit to the Alliance. Now that she was back in her adult form, Suimei could once again appreciate the elegance in her bearing and all her gestures. Lefille then lowered her gaze and looked at Liliana.

"But that aside, it seems Lily is quite knowledgeable about the Alliance."

"To be informed of the state of affairs in neighboring countries... is the duty of the intelligence division. Moreover... I infiltrated it before with the colonel."

"That is to say... you performed some kind of reconnaissance?"

Liliana gave a nod at Felmenia's question. It seemed that, thanks to her time in the army, she had quite a lot of worldly knowledge and experience. With Liliana's magic abilities, there was very little she wasn't capable of. Despite being rather young, she'd even survived the carnage of battle.

Suimei and the others continued to talk about the Alliance as they walked down the street. Coming around a corner, they could hear some kind of speech being delivered in a loud voice down the stone pavement a ways. When they looked, they could see two men in white religious garments complaining to an audience about the

Goddess.

“Oh children of man born in this world! Now is the time to cast aside your faith in Alshuna!”

“Yes! Now that the demons are approaching, not only must we unite in front of the menace closing in before our eyes, but we must also release ourselves from the fetters that bind us!”

The two men in white were both speaking to their audience, artfully alternating between the two of them. They were making grand gestures and had quite a presence. But it seemed there weren't many people stopping to listen; the crowd gathered at the side of the street was rather sparse. Presumably the lack of enthusiasm was because of the content of their speech. They were selling contempt for the Goddess Alshuna, the deity with the largest following in this world. Most passersby likely thought the whole affair was shady, and wouldn't give more than a passing glance as they went about their business.

“...What's with that?”

Suimei stopped and made an odd face as he tilted his head to the side. Following up on that, Felmenia and Lefille also looked at them with a puzzled expression.

“I wonder... It's the first time I have ever seen such a thing.”

“Same for me. Good grief, to think that they would criticize the Goddess in this kind of public place... Saying such things on the land blessed by the Goddess is simply outrageous.”

Lefille was seething. As a particularly religious person, she seemed to take great offense at what was happening, though that was probably true for most of the people witnessing it. Faith in the Goddess Alshuna and the teachings of the Church of Salvation served as a spiritual and moral foundation for the people of this world, after all. But thinking of it like that, Suimei thought it was strange that people would come to give a speech like this in the first place.

Liliana then narrowed her sleepy left eye even further as she gazed at them.

“That's... the Anti-Goddess Cult.”

“Anti-Goddess Cult?”

“It's a religious group that has been gaining followers in the five nations of the Alliance as well as the self-governed state... Their fundamental teachings largely emulate those of the Church of Salvation... but they've adopted the belief that freeing themselves

from the divine protection of the Goddess will allow the seed known as humanity to flourish... And so they urge the people to abandon their faith in Alshuna... They also largely criticize the widespread use of magic and the oracles.”

“For this world where magic is so mainstream, you’d think that kind of thing would get weeded out right away...”

“It seems... it does not go unchallenged. I hear that every once in a while... they end up in skirmishes with the followers of the Church of Salvation... but the church is still unable to sever the enrollment of new members.”

“Hmm...”

It seemed that just by opposing the system, the cult had a certain appeal to it. Would-be iconoclasts that derived a sense of purpose out of banding together to stand against the status-quo seemed to crop up just about everywhere. There were also states that created such organizations to harass enemy nations, so it wasn’t completely baffling to Suimei on that level. But taking into consideration the status-quo of this world revolved around the Goddess, one wrong move might turn the whole world against them. An organization like this had probably come into the limelight in the chaos of the demon invasion.

“The Goddess is not protecting us! For her own benefit, to guarantee her own interests, she is only *pretending* to protect the world!”

“The words of the Goddess are a poison that corrodes humanity! If you listen to her words blindly as you are now, mankind will never flourish! We will remain the slaves of the Goddess for all of eternity! Therefore, now is the time to act! We must flee from our dance atop the Goddess’s palm!”

Suimei was still watching the two men give their impassioned speech as he closely scrutinized them.

“They’re not denying the Goddess’s existence, just saying people shouldn’t follow her. Since the existence of magic proves the existence of the Goddess in this world, I suppose that explains their stance...”

However, this kind of tactic was occasionally used to prop up the existence of another god by promoting whatever teachings sounded good. To tear followers away from one religion, it was fastest and easiest just to make up another for the people to cling to. But from what Suimei could hear, these men weren’t actually

encouraging the people to change their beliefs, so he couldn't tell what kind of benefit they were trying to get out of this. All he really knew was that those words—"we cannot believe in the Goddess" and "we must run away"—felt very weighty to him.

"Suimei-dono? Is something the matter?"

"No, it's nothing. So, what should we do from... Well, there's one thing to take care of before that. Shall we do something about lunch first?"

Liliana, Felmenia, and Lefille agreed with Suimei's proposition.

"I'm also... hungry."

"Then where shall we go?"

"It's right in the middle of lunchtime, so everywhere is likely to be crowded. Shall we just look around and pick a place at random?"

The three others nodded in agreement with Lefille's suggestion. After splitting up to go check out the local restaurants, they fortunately chanced on a place with vacant seating. The others followed Lefille inside. Just as they'd seen from the window, there was a place available for them, and they were guided to a table that was a little large for the four of them.

At a glance, the restaurant with a largely wooden interior appeared to be the kind of place you could find anywhere. But looking closely, there were empty barrels and things everywhere you looked. The tables and chairs were made out of repurposed barrels, and even the mana lamps were made out of empty bottles. There was quite an elaborate, thoughtful design to the place that rivaled what Suimei would expect of the modern world. They asked for whatever the waiter recommended when he came to take their order, and the food came out in short order.

Not long after, Suimei and the others were relishing their food and taking a short break from eating as they enjoyed some water while casually looking around the place. Since it was the middle of the lunch rush, the restaurant was dreadfully packed with plenty of commotion as people continued to file in. And Suimei noticed that the energetic customers all seemed to have something in common.

"As expected of a place called the country of swords, there aren't many mages, huh?"

From what he could see, even those who didn't appear to be warriors also carried swords at their waists. In comparison, the ratio of mages to swordsmen in the Empire was much higher. Over there, mages accounted for somewhere in the neighborhood of five or six

out of every ten people, whereas here, it was only maybe two or three out of ten. After Suimei commented on this, Lefille and Felmenia both had something to say.

“Compared to other countries, the Alliance has a culture that greatly respects the blade. Though they weren’t summoned heroes, there is a history of heroic swordsmen who liberated the lands in this area from the demons for the sake of the people.”

“To add on to that, the Alliance and the self-governed state treat social status a little differently than Astel and the Empire do. Rather than town officials and what have you, it’s swordsmen who are revered and respected.”

“Ah, so as long as you carry a sword, you receive favorable treatment?”

“No, that’s not quite the case. To declare yourself a swordsman in the Alliance, you need proper authorization to do so, which requires receiving permission from the government of one of the five Alliance nations or from the Twilight Pavilion.”

“So in short, Lefille couldn’t call herself a swordswoman here?”

“That’s how it is. If I did so, it would be unofficially.”

Suimei didn’t see what it would matter to be official or unofficial if you carried a sword, but Lefille gave him a somewhat self-deprecating smile when she mentioned it. After that, Liliana took a bite out of a sweet pastry larger than her own face, pushed it into her cheeks, and began explaining while slowly chewing it down.

“Even so... in the Alliance... just by carrying a sword... you are given preferential treatment.”

“How so specifically?”

“Hom... You get priority... Because there are quite a number of services... available in this country, when there’s a hurry... the public agencies see you favorably... without asking questions.”

“Well, that’s pretty nice, huh?”

“Hom... That doesn’t mean it applies... to absolutely everyone, though... Hom, nom...”

Even so, it was really something to be given priority just for carrying a sword. Once Liliana finished her explanation and began attacking her pastry with great care again, Lefille cut in to the conversation.

“So taking that into account for how we proceed, shall we go to the Alliance’s sovereign state of Miazen first?”

“The sovereign state?”

“The guild master of the Twilight Pavilion in the capital city there is an acquaintance of my father’s. If we rely on them as an intermediary, we should be able to arrange all sorts of things, including obtaining the authorization to be called swordsmen.”

“Hom... That... sounds good...”

“I have heard that if you do not have a swordsman as a companion while in the Alliance, you should hire one. So I also think Lefille’s idea sounds good.”

“Well then, the investigation will have to wait until after that...” Suimei replied as he went back to eating his lunch.

It was certainly true that he was anxious to return to his world, but he wasn’t in such a rush that he would be negligent of other matters for that sake. If he really wanted to make progress, it was better to have an assuredly firm foothold in this world. As the group continued to talk and enjoy their food, a waitress approached their table with a troubled expression on her face. She was a fair bit older than the other waitresses and had an exceptional physique. If she were wearing an apron, she would have looked exactly like an old lady Suimei would have expected to see running a local eatery back home. She was probably the proprietress of the establishment.

“Could I bother you for a minute?”

“What’s the matter?”

When Suimei inquired about what she needed, the woman let out a weak laugh and pointed towards the entrance.

“I’m sorry, but would you mind sharing your table with that gentleman over there?”

The person standing where the proprietress was pointing was a tall, dark-skinned man. He was wearing an overcoat to protect himself from blowing sand, which hid the details of his figure, but his arms that came out from under the overcoat were sinewy and thick. Suimei could only guess how well-trained and strong he was. He had long, black hair and a peculiar embroidered bandana around his forehead. He had a scar running across his face, but rather than looking dangerous, he had a slender, masculine face that gave off a somehow sociable impression. He looked a bit embarrassed, but gave Suimei a pleasant smile. To prevent things from getting awkward, Lefille replied as the group’s representative.

“Certainly. We don’t mind.”

“Sorry about that...”

The proprietress apologized meekly and then, in a complete one-eighty, roared to the kitchen to let them know that there was another customer. A younger waitress then quickly brought an additional seat and some water. Suimei scooted over to make room for the man, who quickly settled in.

“Aaah, sorry about butting in right when you all were enjoying your lunch. But I tell you what, after coming to this town, I knew I had to get some of the chef’s special here no matter what!”

Slapping the back of his own head, the man let out a hearty laugh. He gave off a friendly impression despite his imposing physique, and as Suimei had estimated, was apparently quite a character. He didn’t seem timid in the least, and his cheerful smile was quite pleasant. But then, unexpectedly, he let out something of an embarrassed laugh.

“Perhaps I offended you most of all, lad.”

“...Hmm? Me?”

Suimei didn’t understand what he was talking about and cocked his head to the side accordingly. The man then suddenly put his thick arm around the back of Suimei’s neck and leaned in like he intended to talk in secret.

“Well, you see, another man just intruded on your meal with these beauties, you know? Well, one of them is just a wee thing, but talk about a fifth wheel here, am I right?”

“Huh? N-No, that’s not what I was thinking at all. Besides, these girls are just my companions...”

The man sat back up and stared in astonishment at Suimei, who was peddling excuses in a fluster. Unsure why he was being looked at that way, Suimei raised a puzzled voice.

“What is it?”

“...Nothing. I get it. You’re a virgin, ain’t you?”

“WHAT?!”

“I said you’re a virgin, ain’t you?”

“Wh-What the hell are you asking someone you just met?!”

Suimei bolted up out of his seat as he shouted, and the man was slightly taken aback by his reaction.

“Aah, sorry, sorry. My honesty is my redeeming feature, you see. I have a habit of saying exactly what I’m thinking.”

“That kinda honesty is more an annoyance than a virtue—
Oh...”

Suimei then realized that he’d indirectly confirmed that he was,

in fact, a virgin.

“Aah, I see. Thought so.”

“That’s bullshit...”

Suimei writhed in agony at the man’s stupidly sympathetic voice. After expending all his energy yelling, he let out a long sigh and looked around nervously. Liliana was the one sitting beside him, but he didn’t know if Liliana was even listening since she seemed to be completely preoccupied with her pastry. On the other hand, when he looked at Lefille, she avoided making eye contact. As for Felmenia, she was fixedly staring at Suimei.

“...Suimei-dono is a virgin?”

“I-Is that a bad thing?!”

“Ah, no, not particularly! Not at all! No, certainly... heeheehee...”

Suimei thought she was trying to be nice since she couldn’t stop herself from giggling. Turning red in the face, he quickly shifted his gaze elsewhere, but met eyes with Lefille’s when he did.

“Uh...”

“Um...”

All either one of them could manage was a single sound. They both stiffened up as the atmosphere at the table grew even stranger. Eventually, as if to put an end to it, Lefille—still pink in the cheeks—cleared her throat.

“No, um, I think it’s a good thing that Suimei-kun is a virgin.”

“What’s so good about it, damn it?”

Still standing up, Suimei hung his head in abject defeat and shock. His secret (?) had been revealed to everyone, and he was filled with despair from the embarrassment. Sensing the swift decline in Suimei’s mood, Felmenia, intending to throw him a lifeline but ultimately just adding oil to the fire, called on Liliana.

“H-Hey, Lily, you say something to Suimei-dono too.”

It was obvious prolonging this conversation any further would only drive Suimei deeper into desperation. He should have stopped things then and there. Liliana then looked towards Suimei and tugged lightly on his sleeve.

“Suimei... Even if you’re a virgin... it isn’t that embarrassing, you know?”

“Hrk...”

At her words, Suimei crumbled to his knees. Hearing such an innocent girl encourage him in such an innocent way had a

devastating effect on him. The one who dealt the final blow to Suimei, however, simply returned to the conquest of her enormous pastry. All Suimei was left with was the air of pity swirling over his head.

“...So I’m a virgin, damn it. I don’t have any experience with girls, damn it. None at all, damn it. What do you want from me, damn it? What’s wrong with that, damn it? Everyone just goes ‘ooh, ahh, it’s a virgin’ like virgins are some kind of weird species, damn it. I mean, there aren’t that many guys my age with experience anyways, so what’s wrong with that?! I’m living my life the best I can, so don’t screw with meeeeeeeeeeee!”

Suimei had tumbled into the abyss of his mind as he began mumbling darkly to himself. Unable to just watch the pitiful sight unfold, the instigator of all this—the dark-skinned man—shamelessly tried to cheer Suimei up.

“Well, um... Cheer up, lad. You’re still young. Things are just getting started for you.”

“Shut up, you damn ringleader...”

The man faltered a bit when he heard Suimei voice out his resentment. But then, like he’d suddenly realized something, he clapped his hands together.

“Oops, I haven’t introduced myself yet, huh? The name’s Gaius Forvan. I’m a martial arts instructor in Larsheem.”

After Gaius introduced himself, Suimei and the others followed suit. Felmenia and Liliana gave fake names, while Lefille and Suimei used their real identities. Though there was one among them who showed no enthusiasm in doing so, it didn’t really need to be said who that was. To make up for the awkwardness, Felmenia kept the conversation going.

“Larsheem is a country in the northern part of the Alliance, is it not? What brings you to this town?”

“I had a job in the area. Right now, I’m in the middle of returning to Miazen.”

“To Miazen?”

“That’s where I’m currently working out of.”

“Is that so? Our current destination is also Miazen.”

“Me oh my! That’s quite the coincidence.”

Gaius let out a hearty laugh, but quickly stopped smiling and made a troubled expression as he gripped his jaw.

“But you guys sure are an unusual group, eh?”

“We’re not... foreign spies... or anything.”

Taking a short break from her pastry, Liliana pouted and self-consciously defended herself. Gaius laughed it off like that hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“I can tell that much from looking at you. I mean, we’ve got a virgin lad accompanied by a bunch of ladies, right?”

“You’re *still* on about that...”

Hearing Gaius circle back around to the subject of his virginity, Suimei let out a low grumble like he was cursing him. Fortunately, however, it seemed that Gaius was completely unaware that one among them was indeed actually a former spy.

“Then, if I might ask, what makes you say we’re unusual?” Lefille asked.

“Well, that’s ’cause your garments are all over the place. There’s two of you wearing clothes from Astel, and a little girl wearing the frilly clothing that’s popular right now in the Empire. And... it’s Lefille right? You’re from Noshias, ain’t you? It’s a curious combo. Well, it might just be that you’re all friends, but it’s also curious that you all came all the way out here to the Alliance like this.”

It seemed that this man named Gaius was not just a simple, sociable man. Suimei didn’t fail to miss the keen look in his narrowed eyes as he explained his curiosity. Once he finished making his point, Lefille asked him another question.

“Why do you think it’s strange for us to come to the Alliance?”

“Well, that’s ’cause the northern part of the Alliance has become the site of a bloody battle with the demons. It’s not the kinda place you come for sightseeing these days, you see.”

He certainly had a point. There weren’t many people who would choose somewhere crippled with the looming threat of demons marching on the capital for their vacation. Lefille answered Gaius’s doubts with a somewhat meek expression.

“I... have an acquaintance in the Alliance. We’re headed to go meet them.”

“Ah, that so? If that’s the case, then I guess it makes sense.”

Suimei finally seemed to recover as he got back up. He reclined in his chair and folded his arms as he mused out loud.

“But still... a battleground, huh?”

“I believe I heard the demon army was forced back, was it not?” Felmenia asked.

“Damn right it was! By the hero of the Alliance, you hear?! She

chopped a demon general right up! It was quite a magnificent sight, mark my words!”

Gaius slapped his chest as he answered Felmenia with great gusto. It was as if he was bragging about his own accomplishment. Seeing him act like that, Suimei raised an eyebrow and a pointed question.

“A magnificent sight...? Did you see it yourself?”

“Heh heh heh, what is there to hide? My glorious self was just recently fighting demons alongside the hero, you hear?”

As Gaius proudly revealed himself, Suimei looked at him rather dubiously.

“That it, geezer? You a daydreamer? That’s quite disappointing.”

“I’m not! It’s the truth, I say!”

“Oh yeah?”

Suimei shrugged his shoulders exaggeratedly like he was poking fun at Gaius, who looked quite serious despite laughing.

“Heh heh heh... What? You saying you think I’m some kinda small fry?”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding! It was just a joke. I can tell from the muscles on you that you could kill me if you just touched me the wrong way.”

“Damn straight! They’re a real beaut, ain’t they? Muscles are the best!”

Setting aside the matter of exactly how great they were, Suimei could tell that the martial artist in front of him was quite skilled. Though the details of his strength escaped Suimei, it was quite obvious he was strong. But the strong man suddenly went from his high-spirited tales of heroics to sighing.

“Well, thanks to that, most of the army moved northwards.”

“Is something wrong with that?”

“Well, yeah. All our forces are up there facing the demons, you know?”

Suimei tilted his head to the side, still not understanding what was wrong. Liliana then casually began explaining.

“The defense against the Empire... is thin. His apprehensions... likely concern that.”

“It’s just like the little lady says. You’re a good girl, ain’t you? Want a nice pat on the head?”

“Please don’t... I’ll sue.”

Liliana didn't seem fond of being treated like a child by Gaius. She closed her eye and stuck out her tongue, then turned away from him.

"Is the relationship between the Alliance and the Empire stormy?"

"You didn't know that? You sure are ignorant of the world, ain't you? The Empire openly cooperates with Astel and the self-governed state, but when it comes to the Alliance proper, we're just neighbors, you see. From what I've heard, the recent Empire has even been lunging at allied nations."

"Huh..."

Gaius spoke with an air of astonishment on the matter, but it didn't really click with Suimei. In truth, he was fairly disinterested in the matters of this world. He had no reason to get seriously invested in them. Liliana, however, leaned in close to whisper into Suimei's ear.

"It's... deceptive maneuvering. Lately... the Empire has been sowing rumors of non-existent military expansion... to keep neighboring countries in check."

"I see..."

That was probably something she learned during her time in the imperial army's intelligence division. But Suimei wasn't really sure why they were spreading misleading information. Intentionally making themselves seem even more militaristic than they were would only bring on more tension internationally, which had the potential to isolate the Empire and cause a depression. And that would only leave the people unhappy with the government. Furthermore, it wouldn't just make their adversaries worry—it would give their neighbors and allies cause for concern. And all this at a time where demons were invading as well...

Suddenly, Gaius regained his cheerfulness.

"Well, there's a bunch of serious business, but my people've got both me and the hero. We don't have anything to worry about."

He was probably making such a declaration to ease some of the dark tension he'd created by bringing up politics and war.

"The hero, huh...?"

"And yours truly."

"So what kinda guy is this hero?"

"Don't just ignore me, damn it... And the hero summoned by the Alliance is, believe it or not, an exceptionally beautiful sword

master,” Gaius boasted.

“That is to say the Alliance’s hero is a woman, right?” Lefille asked.

“Yeah. You’re also quite the beauty, but she’s a woman whose beauty can be compared to yours... She’s still a little immature though, so she falls outta my strike zone, I gotta say.”

“No one asked about your type.”

As Suimei quipped at him, Gaius looked back at him in surprise.

“If you keep shying away from this kinda conversation, you’ll be a virgin for life, you know?”

“You’re still going on about that, damn it?!”

Suimei let out a cry of frustration as he once more stood up straight out of his seat. He managed to learn a lot, but it ended up being a rather unbelievable lunch.



A few days after parting ways with Suimei and the other girls, Reiji, Mizuki, and Titania had an audience with the emperor of the Nelferian Empire in Castle Groschler, enshrined at the south end of the imperial capital of Filas Philia. They’d just gotten out of their meeting.

“Ah, I’m sooo tired!”

As they settled down in the nobles’ guest room, Mizuki was the first to speak up. Indulging in her escape from the stuffy formality of their meeting, she threw herself onto the leather sofa and let out the long groan she’d been holding back. She was draped over the couch just like laundry casually tossed aside for later. She found it difficult to endure the atmosphere in the audience chamber, and was still sweating from the lingering sensation of the Emperor’s intense aura. Only now that they were far from it was she able to loosen up a bit and relax. Reiji was also quite tired, and he sat down on a red antique chair in the room as he gave Mizuki an awkward smile.

“Mizuki, good job today.”

“Uhuh...”

The exhausted Mizuki replied like she was there in body but not in spirit. Reiji wasn’t sure if she’d actually heard what he’d said. She was still just lounging on the sofa without moving at all. Even Titania who was a veteran at this sort of thing let out a sigh of

relief.

“Seems even you’re exhausted, huh, Tia?”

“Yes. Though I am somewhat accustomed to it, I also have some trouble dealing with His Imperial Majesty.”

“I guess his status... is just that amazing.”

“Compared to other royals, His Imperial Majesty is certainly unique. He’s like a predator.”

“Hahaha...”

Reiji let out a dry laugh at Titania’s assessment as he recalled the emperor. Standing before him on his throne, Reiji had honestly felt the same sense of danger he might standing before a carnivorous beast. The pressure was such that he felt if he let his guard down even just a little, he would be immediately devoured. It must have been the true aura of a leader who’d captained a military nation for so long. However...

“In the end, they didn’t say anything about what happened last time, huh?”

Reiji was talking about their conflict with Graziella over catching the real culprit behind the coma incidents. Lefille also had been nervous about what would come of it, but contrary to their expectation, the Empire didn’t make a fuss about it. In fact, it hadn’t even come up during their audience with the emperor.



As if this turn of events was slightly different from Titania's expectations, she stroked her chin as she spoke.

"Since it involved the hero, they probably do not wish to make an issue of it publicly. I believed our summons was likely either to restrain us or to strike a deal with us, but I suppose His Imperial Majesty also wants to avoid coming into conflict with the church."

"Is that so...? It's only my intuition, but I got the impression he was the type to swoop down on somebody the moment they revealed a weakness and rip them apart."

"Your intuition probably isn't wrong, Reiji-sama. Indeed, when I asked my father about him, he said something in the same vein."

While Reiji and Titania were expressing their reservations on the matter, Mizuki cut into their conversation from her lounging position on the sofa.

"About that... Suimei-kun said he sent a letter to Elliot-kun."

"Suimei did?"

"Something about how at a time like this where every nation is depending on the existence of heroes or something, you probably don't want to cause any issues between the Empire and the Church of Salvation, he said. Or something like that. That's why Elliot-kun, who didn't want to cause problems with heroes from other nations, something or other..."

She trailed off and broke down into rambling towards the end, but Reiji understood what she was trying to say. If rumor spread that two heroes ended up fighting each other due to a blunder by the Empire, then the world would turn against them. And considering the current state of world affairs, that would be a major landmine for them to step on. However, Reiji cocked his head to the side. He still found it rather unusual.

"It seemed like Suimei and Elliot didn't get along at all, though..."

"Even if he hates meee, he seemed quite fond of Reiji-kuuun. So if I ask, he won't flat out refuse,' he said. 'Won't it work out one way or another?' He said something like that too..."

"That is to say... everything went exactly as Suimei intended it to, right?"

"Of course... That's Suimei for you. He really is cunning, the jerk."

“Honestly, I cannot see him as anything but flippant.”

Titania let out a sigh and a bit of biting criticism like she couldn't really accept what Reiji had said. Hearing these words which sounded like she was somehow annoyed, Reiji questioned her as if it was something rather unusual.

“Somehow, Tia, it seems like you suddenly took a turn for the cold with Suimei recently.”

“What? No, certainly not. Ohoho...”

Titania's unnatural laugh filled the room. To anyone who knew the actual situation, it was a blatant attempt to throw off her friends, but Reiji and Mizuki didn't know anything about that.

“Well, it's true that Suimei-kun can be pretty flippant here and there.”

“There's no denying that. But when it comes to it, he's the type who gets things done.”

“I agree there... though reluctantly.”

Reiji let out a bitter smile as Titania tersely agreed with him. Then, in the interest of discussing something more pressing, she changed the subject.

“And so, Reiji-sama, what shall we do from here?”

“Our original plan was to go to the self-governed state, right?”

“Yes. The plan was to give solace to the citizens and inspire the soldiers as usual. Is something the matter with that?”

Reiji's expression clouded over like there was a worry weighing on him.

“...Yeah. I've been thinking about it. That I'm actually rather weak.”

“Pardon?”

“Reiji-kun, what are you saying...?”

Titania was taken aback by his words, while Mizuki looked at him with narrowed eyes. However, Reiji shook his head suggesting it wasn't really that off the mark.

“I mean, back in Astel, I was overpowered by Rajas. Elliot even held back on me. Moreover, I felt like Princess Graziella's magic was a real threat.”

“So all of this has made you question your strength?”

As Titania predicted what he had to say, Reiji nodded seriously. Mizuki, however, spoke up in exasperation.

“You know what, Reiji-kun? Someone like me still can't fight properly you know? I somehow got by in our fight with the princess

that night, but compared to that, haven't you always been fighting? I mean, for real?"

"Mizuki... I received the divine blessing from the hero summoning, right? Even with that, I got overwhelmed by an enemy I was meant to fight, and someone who received the same blessing was easily able to put me in my place. Do you think that's really okay?"

"Reiji-kun..."

Mizuki called his name in a worried voice as Reiji expressed why he thought he was unreliable. But after quietly listening to his inner thoughts, Titania's attitude completely changed and she questioned Reiji with an increasingly firm expression.

"I will be repeating a question I have already asked, but, Reiji-sama, you said that you were a stranger to swordplay, magic, and combat when you came to this world, did you not?"

"...That's right, but Elliot had a lot of composure over me you know?"

"I have heard that the hero of El Meide was a heroic warrior in his own world. There was a gap between the two of you from the very beginning. I believe it's more remarkable that you've already managed to close the distance on him."

"..."

Reiji knew that Titania had a point, but it all just felt like an excuse to him. Stuck in a whirlpool of anxiety, he couldn't find any consolation in what she was saying. Understanding just how he felt, however, Titania continued to criticize his way of thinking.

"I know your heart, Reiji-sama. But the thing we call strength is not something that can be mastered in a single day. Strength, and the dignity attached to it, can only be obtained after experiencing and surviving all manner of things that would cut you down. That is why, if you truly desire strength, the only way to get it is to fight. And is that not what you will be doing from now on?"

After speaking her mind rather adamantly, Titania switched to a somewhat calmer tone as she continued.

"It is something that happens quite often... to march forward impatiently only to go down the wrong path. That is why I believe—for your own good—that we must proceed carefully as we look ahead of us."

Even once she was finished speaking, Titania continued to stare at Reiji. Reiji closed his eyes for a brief moment, and then looked

up at the ceiling.

“...That’s right, isn’t it? Yeah, I got it.”

Perhaps because she was so frankly addressing the heart of his concerns, Titania’s words struck a chord deep within Reiji. His expression brightened ever so slightly, and the two companions nodded to each other. Mizuki, however, addressed her two companions as she bit her lip.

“But... I know this is weird coming from me, but I think it’s undeniable that we are out of our depth, right? I think that if we’re not at least as strong as Felmenia-san and Lefille-cha... I mean Lefille-san... we’re gonna end up at the end of the line pretty soon.”

“That is...”

Titania was also concerned on that point. If Suimei hadn’t weakened Rajas as much as he did, Reiji and Mizuki would have been forced into a much harder fight. And from here, there would be other demons equally as strong, not to mention the Demon Lord who likely surpassed all of them. Against such enemies, there would probably be nothing they could do. The wrinkle between his eyebrows grew more pronounced as he racked his brain, Reiji turned to the two girls.

“What do you think we should do?”

“Dunno. Training or something?”

“That’s kind of trite, isn’t it?”

“But isn’t it about the only method we have?”

While Mizuki was struggling with the difficult problem presented to them, Titania spoke with a quiet resolution like she had some sort of brilliant plan.

“There is one suggestion I would like to make.”

“What’s that?”

“It will not make you physically stronger, Reiji-sama, but if we go to the self-governed state of the Saadias Alliance, the equipment used by a hero previously summoned is still there.”

Hearing those words, Mizuki, who was still lounging on the couch, suddenly sat up.

“Th-Then it’s some kind of legendary weapon, right?! Right?!”

“If you had to describe it in such tacky terms, then yes, it is.”

“That kind of thing exists?”

“Yes. A long time ago, a king who possessed tremendous power in the self-governed state plotted to conquer its neighboring countries. Sensing the impending crisis, the Church of Salvation

performed the hero summoning ritual to defeat the tyrant. It is said that the esteemed hero summoned at that time possessed a substantial amount of power and wielded a very powerful weapon. Not just that weapon, but altars used to revere the tyrant as a god, books kept by the tyrant, and all manner of other things have been kept by the church as relics.”

“And so you’re saying we should go get that weapon?”

“If we do, I expect it will raise our combat potential.”

“Yeah, yeah! Good idea! Let’s go with that! This is a legendary weapon we’re talking about! How much better can you get?!”

Aside from the suddenly high-spirited Mizuki, Reiji also thought that retrieving the weapon would be a good plan. Improving himself was important, but in a fight, his weapon would also be essential.

And just as their conversation was coming to a head, an unexpected knock came at the guest room door. Reiji and the others turned towards the door, and a familiar voice came from the other side.

“Excuse me. I was informed that the hero Reiji was here, but... May I?”

“Yeah. That’s you, isn’t it, Elliot? By all means, come in.”

With Reiji’s permission, Elliot and Christa entered the room.

“Hello, Elliot. What’s the matter today?”

“Nothing really. I was told to come to the castle, so I did. And since I’m here, I decided to come and greet you as well.”

“Sorry for the trouble, but thanks for coming.”

“I must admit I did have something I wanted to talk about, however.”

Before moving on to what Elliot wanted to talk about, Reiji cut in with something he had to say first.

“By the way, it seems that you made all sorts of arrangements for us with regards to what happened.”

“Aah, that...? Hmph, I resent things going exactly the way that man planned, but I couldn’t refuse him when it was all for the hero’s sake, after all.”

“Thank you. You saved us.”

“No, no, you needn’t worry about it. Indeed, you can just think of me as being meddlesome. Ah, but if you see that guy again, do tell him he owes me. It’s only proper to repay one’s debts.”

“Hahaha... Got it.”

It seemed that he'd make it a point to show no mercy to Suimei. Reiji acknowledged his request with a smile. Mizuki then cocked her head to the side.

"I know it's rather sudden to ask, but what do you plan to do from here, Elliot-kun?"

"Hmm? Ah, well, we spent quite a bit of time discussing it, but we are planning to stop our sympathy calls and start meeting up with the other summoned heroes."

"I see... That's also quite important, isn't it?"

Reiji was a bit stunned. Nobody had ever suggested that to him, so the thought had never crossed his mind.

"This is my business with you today. I want us to be able to keep in touch before moving into the decisive battle. It is also important that we can mobilize the armies of all the other nations. In this kind of situation, frankly, it is best to act in harmony, no? Though I do not know whether or not we will be able to rely completely on the power of the church for that."

Cooperation was at a disturbing low between the nations, likely due to the cynicism of the majority of world leaders currently in power. It seemed Elliot had put quite a lot of thought into the subjugation of the demons.

"That is why, when it comes down to it, we will have to be able to gather our forces. Frankly speaking, I do not think an order from the church would be sufficient. So I thought that I would first start with the Alliance, which is closest to us right now..."

A bitter expression swept over Elliot's face as he trailed off.

"Ah, but I also heard they were headed towards the Alliance. I would like the chance to see Lefille-chan and Felmenia-chan again, but that man will be with them, won't he?"

"Do you really dislike Suimei-kun that much, Elliot-kun?"

"The mere sight of his face somehow causes me great offence. I heard the hero summoned by the Alliance was quite the beauty, so it's regrettable, but... Ow!"

"Elliot-sama!"

"Yes, yes. It was just a joke. A joke, all right?"

Elliot tried to calm Christa down in a fluster. From Reiji and Mizuki's perspective, it looked like a Nioh was standing behind Elliot. After trying to soothe her anger for a while, he unnaturally cleared his throat to try and clear the air.

"Ehem! So, in short, we will be going through Astel to meet the

hero in Thoria. So, about you three...”

“We’re heading to the self-governed state,” Mizuki declared as she excitedly threw her arms up in the air.

“The self-governed state, you say?” Christa asked.

“We’re also putting our sympathy calls on hold and going to get a legendary weapon left behind by a past hero.”

“Legendary weapon...? Ah, that thing.”

“Oh? Do you know about it, Elliot-kun?”

It seemed he had some idea what they were talking about. But when asked about it, his expression quickly shifted from one of understanding to one of puzzlement.

“Sacra... something or other, was it? It had a name like that.”

“Huh? Sakura? What about sakura?”

“Elliot-sama, it is Sacrament.”

“Yes, that. I also heard it was a great weapon, but when I went to see it, it was just a decoration with a blue gem in it.”

“Could it be... you took it?”

“Well, I intended to.”

Elliot paused there. Reiji wasn’t sure what that meant, and he also didn’t know what Elliot meant by the weapon being “just a decoration.” As Reiji and his companions all raised a collective eyebrow, Christa gave them the answer to their unasked question.

“Based on written records, it is certain that it was passed down as a weapon. According to legend, however, it will not transform into a weapon until it is wielded by... someone deemed appropriate.”

Christa hesitated to say it. Titania then looked at Elliot.

“But Elliot-sama, you don’t seem to be carrying it.”

“That’s correct. When I tried it out, nothing happened at all.”

“That’s why you left it?”

“Indeed.”

Elliot gave a weak smile, and then turned towards Reiji.

“But that does not mean that you shouldn’t go. It did not acknowledge me, but it very well may acknowledge you, after all.”

“There’s no need to be so humble, Elliot-sama...”

“You cannot deny the possibility. I imagine there’s some special condition set for its activation.”

Elliot spoke with a rather encouraging tone and look about him. Reiji was compelled to nod reflexively, such was the persuasive power of his attitude. He then looked at Elliot with a bit of envy.

“Oh? What is the matter, Reiji? Looking at me like that...”

“No, I was just thinking that you’re really something.”

“I may just be squirming frantically behind it all.”

Reiji was unable to tell if Elliot was being serious or not.

“But... you’re strong, right?”

“Hmm?”

“When you fought against me, you were holding back. And from what Suimei told me, that time you fought Princess Graziella, you didn’t go all out either.”

After a long moment of silence, a cold expression flashed across Elliot’s face as he snorted.

“To be seen through by that man... It gets on my nerves.”

“Then, Elliot-sama, at that time...?!” Christa gasped.

“That’s right. I did not go all out. It wasn’t the time or place. But a loss is a loss.”

As Elliot gallantly accepted his loss, Christa closed in on him one forceful step at a time. She looked like she was somewhere between disbelief and anger.

“Elliot-sama! Why didn’t you give your all?! It would have been fine to just beat Her Imperial Highness into a pulp!”

She didn’t seem to be able to bear the fact that Elliot had lost in such a manner, and began stamping her foot in defiance. Mizuki looked at this in surprise before speaking up.

“Wait a sec, we’re in the imperial castle, you know...? Christa-san, you’re saying some pretty wild stuff, all things considered...”

“Urk!”

Finally realizing what she had been doing, Christa looked around her surroundings abruptly. No matter the reason, it would obviously be bad if someone heard her showing such contempt for the princess, much less on imperial property. Seeing Christa suddenly fall silent over her blunder, everyone else giggled a little. But soon after that, Titania regained a serious expression as she turned to Reiji.

“And so, Reiji-sama, what do you think of going to the self-governed state?”

“Yeah, let’s try and go. I think it’s better to be greedy about strength right now. So let’s go and test whether I can use this Sacrament or not.”

“All riiight! Self-governed state of the Saadias Alliance, here we come!”

Reiji revealed a somewhat meek, troubled expression as Mizuki pumped her fist energetically into the air.

“But... it’s not like we’ll be going right away...”

“What do you mean we’re not— Ah !!”

Mizuki let out a loud, dramatic gasp. She seemed to have finally remembered exactly why they were in the Empire to begin with.

“Oh? Is there something going on?” Elliot asked, intrigued.

“There are some circumstances, you see, Elliot-sama, but it is nothing you need to trouble yourself with,” Titania replied in a composed fashion.

“Well, that’s all fine and good. If you are going, however, it would be better to do so sooner rather than later. The demons will not exactly wait for you.”

After giving them that warning, Elliot suddenly appeared as though he remembered something and turned a cynical smile on Reiji.

“At any rate, you also really have it quite rough, I see.”

“What... do you mean by that?”

It was Reiji who’d asked for clarification, but Titania and Mizuki also stood there with their heads cocked to the side. They had no idea why Elliot was shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head. He hadn’t given them enough of a clue to grasp his meaning. But without helping them any further, he turned away.

“It is nothing. You will understand soon enough. Now, it is about time we left, Christa.”

“Yes. As you will.”

“Well then, farewell.”

With that, Elliot left the room accompanied by Christa.

“What was that all about?”

“No idea...”

Reiji and Mizuki looked at each other, completely bewildered. But just a few seconds later, they could hear footsteps outside the door. Perhaps Elliot had come back, or maybe it was someone else? As they all started to wonder who it was...

“Excuse me.”

A woman’s voice called to them from the other side of the door. Without waiting for a response, she rudely opened the door and let herself in. It was none other than their opponent from the other night, Graziella Filas Rieseld.

Today, she wasn’t wearing her over-the-top military uniform,

but normal clothes. Dressed in such a fashion, however, she hardly looked the part of an imperial princess. Perhaps this was what she wore casually. Her cleavage was exposed, but her style was so casual that it did nothing to accentuate her voluptuousness. Her willful and proud face, however, conveyed a certain amount of irritation and dissatisfaction. If anything, she looked sullen. It seemed she appeared because something was bothering her. Meanwhile, seeing her natural enemy appear, Titania went from her usual gentle expression to a cold one in an instant.

“Your Imperial Highness Princess Graziella, do you have some sort of business with us?”

Seeing the state Graziella was in, Titania made no attempts at hiding the hostility in her tone.

“Don’t glare like that.”

“I don’t believe I am.”

“My goodness, it seems that I am quite hated.”

Graziella was a little tired of the aggression directed at her, but Titania faced her with a swordsman’s composure as she continued to question her.

“And so, what is your business with us today?”

She more or less already had an idea as to why Graziella was there. Giving voice to her concerns, Mizuki cut in with an anxious expression.

“C-Could it be about what happened last time...?”

“Hmm? No, that has already been resolved. I have no intention of bringing it up again after all that. Besides, it would only be contrary to the Emperor’s decree to continue hounding you about it after my father has already deemed it irrelevant.”

“I-I see...”

Hearing that her anxieties were unfounded, Mizuki let out a sigh of relief. It seemed Graziella actually had a surprisingly refreshing personality. Though she said she’d put the past behind her, she was still holding a slight grudge over it, though she had no intention of mentioning it. Perhaps it just hadn’t come to that yet... But moving on, she finally gave the answer to Titania’s previous question.

“And so, in regards to why I’m here, it seems I’ll be troubling you bastards from today onward.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Wh-What does that mean, Your Imperial Highness?!”

Titania yelled with such vigor that she bolted up out of her seat. Without even asking for consent on the matter, Graziella had made a bold declaration about their future together. Titania was deeply shaken, and Graziella answered her with a bitter expression.

“I meant exactly what I said, Your Royal Highness Titania.”

“No, but that...!”

“In short, I’ll be accompanying you bastards on your journey.”

Titania fell back into her chair with great force. It was all she could do. Reiji and Mizuki also looked rather surprised and doubtful. Graziella then offered them some candid advice.

“There’s no need for all of you to make such faces. Loosen up. Though I’ll admit I am also rather reluctant about this matter.”

“Then why...?”

“If I was told to do so by an oracle, then I have no choice in the matter.”

“Wha... Alshuna’s oracle...!”

“So this is what Elliot was talking about...”

Reiji finally understood what he’d meant. Elliot had known this would happen beforehand, which is why he’d said what he did. He likely predicted their current bewilderment and was laughing like a little imp right now. Reiji was unable to stop rubbing his brow, and the girls were unable to collect themselves as they stared at Graziella.

“There are no objections, I assume?” she asked.

“...Even if there were, we can do naught but obey Alshuna’s oracle.”

Titania’s mental state must have been very complex as she admitted that. Her face showed she only did so begrudgingly. After giving her a brief glance, Graziella turned her attention to Reiji and Mizuki.

“And you two?”

“I’m... As long as you don’t squabble, then it’s fine, but...”

Still overwhelmed, Mizuki’s trailed off at the end. Relenting, Reiji sighed and pulled himself together as he addressed Graziella.

“I have one condition.”

“What’s that? Are you saying that I should spend one night with you or something? You certainly move fast, don’t you?”

“Th-That’s not it! What made you even think that?! This conversation is the only thing moving fast!”

Reiji rose to his feet in a fluster and let out a grand shout of protest at Graziella's bombshell. Observing his panic without paying it any mind, she indifferently fanned the flames.

"What? I don't particularly mind, you know."

"I mind!"

"Me too!"

Unable to let that slide, Titania and Mizuki both objected instantly. After making a bored expression, Graziella once more returned her gaze on Reiji.

"So, what's your damn condition?"

With a quick, tired sigh, Reiji looked at her seriously as he made himself clear.

"I'd like you to stop calling us bastards."

"Hmph. Certainly, even if it is only temporary, calling my companions bastards is quite disrespectful, huh? Fine then."

She readily accepted his condition without any objection. Reiji was under the impression she was a haughty woman, but she was unexpectedly understanding. Much like when she said she'd put the other night behind her, Reiji was still surprised to discover she had a much more refreshing personality than he'd thought.

"Well then, Astel's hero Reiji, Your Royal Highness Titania, and Mizuki, our guest from another world, I look forward to working with you."

"L-Likewise..."

They were all taken aback by Graziella's suddenly humble attitude. Titania in particular looked especially dumbfounded. Mizuki, on the other hand, leaked out a completely bewildered question at this most unexpected development.

"Just what's going to happen to us...?"

It seemed that their little group had suddenly become quite the tempestuous combination of people.



Suimei's party arrived in the Alliance's sovereign state of Miazen with the intent of visiting Lefille's acquaintance. On the way there, they'd passed through two or three other major towns, but being the sovereign state, Miazen was simply on a different scale in terms of size. The walls surrounding the city were not particularly high, but its total circumference was larger than even Filas Philia.

Such spaciousness was reflected inside the city, too. Much like the other towns they'd seen of the Alliance, the houses were nicely spread out, and nothing felt crammed together or cramped.

Apart from the standard slew of swordsmen, the city also had a thriving population of demi-humans. As one would expect of a city known as the Capital of Swords, the dwarves who crafted such tools gathered here in force. As was typical of the country, there was also a variety of therianthropes around. Despite the fact that it was still just the middle of the day, the dwarves were gulping down alcohol at restaurants on every street. Therianthropes and humans alike were cheerfully basking out in the afternoon sun. Just looking around the town, it was clear the mix of races here was more pronounced than it was in the Empire.

Upon entering the city, Suimei and the others headed straight for the local branch of the Twilight Pavilion. When they informed the receptionist that they were acquaintances of the guild master, she immediately escorted them to the guild master's office on the second floor.

Inside was a woman, presumably the guild master, relaxing on a leather sofa. She appeared to be relatively youthful, and was leaned back comfortably as she puffed on a pipe. She was wearing an outfit that reminded Suimei somewhat of traditional Japanese clothing. But above all else, her most prominent features were her golden hair and the fox ears sprouting out of it. Moreover, from her backside, there were one, two, three... All of seven fox tails coming out.

She appeared to be quite a showy fox-type therianthrope, but had a calm and composed air about her. Lefille, who was the one who'd requested an audience with the guild master as an acquaintance, was smiling pleasantly. Felmenia seemed to be quite nervous, and Liliana was mumbling about the number of the woman's tails as she fixedly stared at the golden, fluffy things like she was entranced.

After everyone took a seat across from the therianthrope guild master, her lips cracked a smile as a delighted, stifled laugh came over her. Once she managed to choke it back and collect herself, she looked at Lefille.

"To think that you were actually alive, Lefi... Huhuhu! How should I put it? You've had quite a stroke of good fortune against all odds, haven't you?"

The representative of the Twilight Pavilion's Miazen branch, Rumeya, joyously acknowledged this happy turn of events.

"It has been a long time, Rumeya-dono. I cannot thank you enough for your receiving us so graciously on such a sudden visit."

As Lefille expressed her gratitude in an overly formal manner, the therianthrope woman—Rumeya—went agape like she could hardly believe what she was hearing.

"Goodness me, what's this? It's not like it's the first time we've met, yet you still insist on the formalities? Even though we're in my office, that's not particularly my style, you know."

"It's been so long, isn't it only appropriate for me to at least greet you properly?"

"How stiff. What are you even saying to a therianthrope?"

Lefille was making a difficult expression, and Rumeya was just shrugging her shoulders. Suimei had heard that therianthropes in general were, to put it politely, rough around the edges. They seemed to dislike the decorum that humans used in formal situations. This woman apparently felt that way too. As if to say she was over with the formalities herself, Lefille loosened her expression.

"By the way, what's that?"

Lefille pointed her gaze at the earthenware container in Rumeya's hand. Rumeya offered a rather indifferent reply.

"Isn't it obvious? It's booze. Alcohol. The good stuff."

"A-Aren't you in the middle of your official duties...?"

"Who cares? Consider it a toast to your survival."

With that, Rumeya lifted her cup up and gulped down its contents. However, in contrast to her merriment, Lefille was making a somewhat gloomy expression. Grasping the meaning behind it, Rumeya's attitude seemed to completely change as she quietly closed her eyes.

"As I suspected... Aldephize didn't make it?"

"No. In order to let me get away, His Majesty and the leader rallied the remaining men to stall for time. He probably didn't survive..."

"We lost a good man..."

"As his daughter, I'm honored to hear you speak so highly of him, Rumeya-dono."

Lefille bowed her head respectfully. Both she and Rumeya remained silent for a profound moment as they offered a prayer for

dead. Rumeya then lifted her pipe to her lips and let out a puff of smoke.

“Hahh... Now then, such solemn moments aren’t meant to drag on forever. It’s about time you introduced me to your friends.”

Rumeya tapped the ashes out of her pipe and took her time in passing her gaze over Lefille’s companions. Obliging her request, Lefille gave a brief introduction of their group. Suimei and the others then introduced themselves one by one.

“Like Lefille said, I’m Suimei Yakagi.”

“And I am Felmenia Stingray.”

“I’m... Liliana Zandyke.”

Rumeya raised an intrigued eyebrow; some of those names were familiar to her. And then, despite reprimanding Lefille for her prim behavior earlier, she set aside her pipe, corrected her posture, and introduced herself in turn.

“I am Rumeya. Rumeya of the golden fox clan. I am sure you are already aware, but I serve as the guild master here.”

Suimei noticed Felmenia’s expression stiffen up upon hearing that introduction. It seemed Rumeya’s name alone was enough to give a normal person of this world some pause. However, since Suimei was an outsider in every sense of the word, he was unfazed. Knowing he was lacking context, Felmenia leaned over and whispered into his ear. Rumeya was indeed quite famous; she was one of the Seven Swords, the swordswoman known as Camellia Sasanqua.

“I take it she’s strong?”

“Camellia Sasanqua, also known as the Empress of the Sword Dance, is considered strong even among the Seven Swords. If that’s difficult to grasp, then just think of her skill as being equal to or greater than that of Her Royal Highness Titania.”

“You don’t say? How scary...”

Suimei’s shoulders drooped in a disheartened fashion. To suddenly be dealing with someone so powerful out of the blue was bad for his heart. Titania was quite a menace, and Rogue’s abilities were also considerable. If the woman before him now was on par with or surpassed the two of them, then she must be outright terrifying with a sword. Rumeya then suddenly focused her gaze on Suimei. But without saying a single word to him, she turned back to Lefille.

“I haven’t heard of this young man before, but the other two

you brought along have made quite the names for themselves, haven't they? Astel's genius mage, and..." For a brief moment, Rumeya pointed a sharp gaze at Liliana. "One of the Empire's Elite Twelve, the daughter of the Sword Master of Lonely Shadow."

"I'm not... one of the Elite Twelve anymore. Nor am I... a soldier of the Empire."

"If I recall correctly, I heard you were made out to be the culprit of some incident. Did you resign after being reprimanded?"

"There were some circumstances... but if you were to put it simply... yes, it was something like that."

"Circumstances"? Well, as long as you weren't picking a fight with children from the guild, I don't really care."

Suimei and the others couldn't really tell if that was true or if it was just a convenient way to put the matter aside. Sensing the nuance, Lefille spoke up to put a definitive end to the issue.

"It's alright, Rumeya-dono. Lily is my companion."

"Hmph, is that so?"

Trusting both Lefille and her word, Rumeya smiled in a way that exposed her canines. She was either pleased to hear such a stout defense of Liliana's character, or amused to see the young girl cling so tightly to Lefille's arm. Either way, Rumeya's expression softened as she watched the two of them.

"Pity I've never actually had a match with the Lonely Shadow."

"The colonel... also said the same. That he would like... to have a match with you."

"That reminds me, Lefille... Surely you've finally become stronger than me, haven't you?"

"No, certainly not. My swords skills still have a long way to go."

"Hmmm... Do you really think so?"

Hearing Lefille speak so humbly, Rumeya gave her a mischievous smirk. She'd probably seen right through Lefille and could tell exactly how strong she really was. The keen insight of such a skilled swordsman was truly terrifying. Suimei didn't doubt that Lefille's strength was comparable to one of the Seven Swords, but...

"Now that I think of it, why isn't Lefi one of those Seven Swords? You're about that strong, right?"

Suimei had wondered about it before, but this conversation renewed the question in his mind. Lefille was the one to answer him.

“Once a year in the north, there’s a competition to decide the swordsmen who are granted the title of the Seven Swords. If you don’t participate and win, you can’t receive the title.”

“So you haven’t participated? Why not?”

“Because I have the power of the spirits. That... makes the match a little unfair, don’t you think?”

“I don’t really think that kinda thing matters, honestly,” said Rumeya as she exhaled smoke. “Both you and Aldephize used the same excuse not to participate in the tournaments. How stubborn.”

Rumeya meant to say that since the power of the spirits was Lefille’s to wield, there was nothing unfair in her using it. But everything is relative, and Lefille felt differently. Even if she won using her powers, it would be a hollow victory as long as she felt it was ill-gotten. Having seen Lefille’s power with her own eyes back in the Empire, Felmenia gave a serious nod as she spoke up on the matter.

“With your power, I believe you could take a rather prestigious position in the Seven Swords... I dare say you might even be able to take the crown.”

“Indeed, I also believe I could win.”

“I bet you could...” agreed Suimei.

He had zero argument to her confidence. He’d thought she was exceptional even when they first met at the Twilight Pavilion in Metel, and she only went on to prove his suspicions after that. Back when they fought with Rajas, it was her power that ultimately brought him down. Though she’d felt quite helpless in her diminished, petite state for quite some time, even that was just a side effect of her tremendous power. Suimei didn’t know all of the Seven Swords, but he was quite sure that Lefille could hold her ground against each of them—possibly even all of them at once. And while Suimei was contemplating this, Lefille turned to him.

“But Suimei-kun, if you used your magicka freely, you too would be able to compete with your sword skills, wouldn’t you?”

“Me? Nah, that’d be nuts. Throwing a half-baked swordsman like me in an arena with people who actually know what they’re doing would be the end of me.”

“Half-baked? Didn’t you study swordsmanship?”

“Only for a bit. Partway through my training, I kinda plateaued. I mostly just know the fundamentals. Well, I mean, I did have an instructor if that’s what you’re asking...”

Kuchiba Kiyoshiro, the man who taught swordsmanship at the dojo Suimei had attended, was one of Japan's foremost sword masters. He was an old acquaintance of Suimei's father, and accordingly, Suimei had studied the way of the sword under his tutelage from a young age.

Eventually, however, Suimei ended up giving magicka his undivided attention and consequently neglecting his sword practice, which he'd always found somewhat regrettable. His instructor was aware of his circumstances, so Suimei was sure he'd be warmly welcomed if he went back after all this time to pick up the Kuchiba sword style again... though he was equally sure an unreasonable condition like "you'll be putting all of your energy into this until the day you die" would be tacked on.

"Hmm... From what I saw when you exchanged blows with Rajas, I don't think you would fall behind though..."

"What's this? The little fellow here... Your name is Suimei, right? Are you really that strong? From the look of it, you're quite stringy and squishy. I'd have guessed you were a mage."

"Ha... ha... Well, I can't really deny that..."

Suimei let out a bitter laugh as he agreed with her. It was true that he wasn't particularly muscular and might even outright look like he was weak... But even then, hearing someone describe him like they would a vegetable—to his face, no less—was a bit much.

"Indeed, he's quite strong," Lefille said with a bold laugh.

"Truly? From what I've seen and heard, he simply appears to be a mage..."

"If I may..." politely interjected Felmenia. "Suimei-dono is one of the people I summoned alongside the hero in the hero summoning ritual. He is a mage from another world—a magician."

"You don't say... So this is a mage from the same world as Astel's famous hero, huh? I see. So that's what makes you so strong... I guess you really are powerful then, aren't you, little fellow?" With a grin, Rumeya took another gulp from her cup. "Good grief, this is getting ridiculous... Are other worlds filled with nothing but strong men and women?"

"No... It isn't quite like that."

"Hmm? Is that so? I heard that the heroes summoned this time around were all more or less exceptionally strong."

This was the first Suimei had heard of it, and he began counting out the heroes he knew on his fingers.

“Let’s say Reiji’s a bust and that playboy hero from El Meide is passable. That means the others would be...”

“I don’t know much about the hero summoned by Thoria, but the hero summoned by the Alliance is an incredibly skilled swordswoman. She took her place on the battlefield and had no trouble driving back the demon army. Though I must say I haven’t actually met her yet.”

“Now that you mention it... Didn’t we also hear something about that in the first town we visited?” asked Felmenia.

“As I thought... those summoned by the hero summoning ritual are simply on a different level,” Lefille sighed.

As those discouraged words escaped her lips, Lefille’s face clouded over. She was likely feeling powerless, thinking about how she’d been unable to save her own country.

“I heard the demon army that attacked the Alliance was only a third of the size of the one that attacked Noshias, you know. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be sitting here smoking tobacco like I hadn’t a care in the world.”

Rumeya was trying to cheer Lefille up in her own way by telling her she had nothing to feel bad about. And hearing that, Lefille’s expression began to clear up. Rumeya gave her a grand smile as she puffed a cloud of smoke out of her pipe. She then leaned in over the table.

“So, Suimei, tell me truly. Just how strong are you?”

“Well, enough that I’m not embarrassed about it.”

Lefille and Liliana both looked quite astonished at Suimei’s modest appraisal.

“That’s rich, Suimei-kun. Don’t lie to the lady.”

“Seriously... That’s... outright deception.”

“Hey now, what’s with you two?”

Lefille and Liliana both looked at him critically, but he could only look back at them in confusion. He’d given the humble answer he thought anyone would... How had they taken it? Next, even Felmenia let out an astonished sigh.

“Did you not defeat Her Royal Highness back in the imperial capital, Suimei-dono?”

“Oh? White Flame-dono, when you say ‘Her Royal Highness,’ that would be the Twilight Beheading Princess, no? That’s quite something, I must say.”

Rumeya let out a grand laugh. She was probably aware of

Titania's true power. Felmenia then once more turned her reproachful gaze on Suimei.

"I've suggested this before... but would everything not end peacefully if you just went to defeat the Demon Lord yourself, Suimei-dono?"

"No way, no how. I don't care what you say or how you put it, that's unreasonable. I told you before and I'll say it again: I'd be too outnumbered for power to matter."

"Couldn't we solve that by gathering sufficient troops?"

"We could in theory, but then the soldiers who came to support me would also have to be prepared to get caught up in my magicka."

"Maybe so... But with your talents, Suimei-dono..."

Felmenia was still stubbornly clinging to the idea. Suimei made a serious face in reply, and answered her as a magician.

"Menia, you're thinking about using magicka by this world's standards, aren't you? I taught you about mystical entropy the other day, right? Thanks to the small amount of entropy produced by the mages here, you don't have any problems using magic on the battlefield. But I can't recklessly fire off magicka repeatedly in the same place. Moreover, all the troops trying to support me would get stuck in the big magicka explosions. It wouldn't go well, see?"

"Oh..."

"But Suimei-kun," Lefille chimed in. "You could fight without using large-scale magicka, right?"

"You mean like that one time? It's true I defeated about ten thousand of them back then, but I took quite a beating for it. There was also the fact that I was pretty pissed then and wasn't really paying attention to myself or my surroundings... But the fight dragged on long enough that entropy didn't really come into play."

As he finished, Rumeya smirked like she couldn't wait to jump into the conversation.

"Huhu... In that case, you could just go around and defeat the enemy commanders, right? That would drastically reduce the fighting, I'd think."

That much was certainly true. It was a sound strategy to cut off the head first. But that may not work in a war against demons, and Suimei knew better.

"It's still unreasonable. Striking down the generals will surely give us the upper hand on the battlefield, but in the long term, it

won't make much difference. If we slay all the demon generals, another batch will just replace them and receive divine protection from the Evil God."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"They're individually strong, sure, but the demons are also given a fragment of the Evil God's power. So even if we slay the stronger demons, the Evil God will just shift the power it had invested in them to someone else. In effect, their collective strength won't decrease all that much. If they had some genius tactician that we could take out, however, that might work..."

"Then, Suimei-dono, what can we even do to do take out the threat the demon army poses?"

"It's just conjecture on my part, but I don't think there's anything we *can* do short of thinning their numbers."

"What do you mean?"

"In short, the problem is the Evil God's capacity to intervene in this world. The beings we refer to as deities inhabit a different plane of existence, and are fundamentally unable to interfere with this one. That's why they have to appeal to beings of this realm and have them act as agents. Well, there's the exception of doing something like the hero summoning, but generally speaking, interfering in other worlds requires an indirect approach. For example, in the case where a deity wants to take over the world for themselves, they'd have to take the roundabout path of getting their hands on a large population of beings who sympathize with them. Followers, if you will. Like what the demons are to the Evil God."

After taking a short pause, Suimei continued his explanation in his own way.

"They can either whisper to people in their dreams to brainwash them, or conceive fallen children. Either way, a deity is able to increase the number of pawns under their control. And when the number of people seeking a deity's power increases, their grip around this world tightens. It increases their ability to interfere here. When that happens, the deity can share its power with even more people... and bring more people under their control. And once they gain even more followers..."

"Hmph... A cycle begins, right?"

Hearing Rumeya groan, Suimei returned a nod.

"That's right. That's why, as long as so many demons exist in this world, their god's power will remain unchanged. So,

effectually, the only way to bring about a resolution would be to do something about the Evil God itself. That, or decimate its followers until its ability to interfere in this world is no longer a threat. Basically, we'd need to kill a whole lot of demons. That said, going up against the Evil God directly would be, without a doubt, madness."

The proverbial saying was: "Before going after the general, one should first go after their horse." The situation was something like that.

"Well, this is all assuming the origin of the demons' power and evil gods work the same as they do in my world..."

"So to summarize what Suimei-dono is saying, to do something about the demons, something must be done about the Evil God. And to do something about the Evil God, something must be done about the demons..."

"How... bothersome," said Liliana with an exhausted sigh.

"No kidding," agreed Suimei with a similar sigh.

Thinking about it like that, this just feels like it's going to play out like some tower defense game where both sides are constantly trying to drive the other back. Too bad we can't just release this world and its people from their dependence on divine beings... Wait...

When that thought crossed his mind, Suimei realized he'd heard something similar back in the first town they'd come to in the Alliance. The Anti-Goddess Cult there was advocating for the people to take hold of their faith and free themselves from the fetters of the Goddess. If the cult had really managed to grasp the truth of the situation and was acting on that...

Nah, there's no way.

Suimei hated overthinking things, so he quickly shook his head and put such speculation out of his mind. He was giving them too much credit. The people of this world hardly had any real knowledge of divine beings, meaning they lacked the framework to come to that kind of conclusion. And there was no way they'd figured it out by chance. As Suimei was clearing away his doubts, a light gleamed in Rumeya's eyes as she seemed to remember something.

"It seems we've gone a fair bit off topic, haven't we? What were we talking about to begin with again?" she asked.

"Whether or not... Suimei is a liar... right?"

"Hey, Liliana, don't lie so nonchalantly."

“My apologies. I meant... whether or not... he’s a big liar.”

“Hey...”

Suimei hung his head in defeat as he watched Liliana continue her little joke with a charming smile. But then both Lefille and Felmenia took her side.

“Lily isn’t wrong.”

“Certainly not.”

“How mean...”

Suimei no longer had any allies.

“Anyway, I still haven’t asked, but what brings you all to the Alliance?” said Rumeya.

“We talked about how I was summoned from another world earlier, right? We came here looking for clues as to how I might get back. I read in an old book from Astel that the first hero summoning ritual was performed somewhere in the Alliance.”

“So you came to poke around? I must say you’re in luck. In fact, the place where the first ritual was performed is indeed in the Alliance,” Rumeya replied with a nod as though she knew exactly what he was talking about.

“Really?”

“Yes. But about that... Right now, it’s in the demon’s sphere of influence. I’m sure you heard that the demons invaded the Alliance because it was in the way geographically speaking. I doubt you looked into the matter any more than that, but when they first attacked, they took over quite a lot of territory, you see. That included the ancient ruins where the first ritual took place.”

“Great... If that’s the case...”

“Yes, if you want to go there, you’ll have to do something about the demons who are still hanging around.”

Rumeya spoke with a serious expression as if she was trying to warn them. She meant to say it would be a dangerous undertaking. Reading between the lines, Suimei let out a grand sigh.

“Hahh... Of course it turned out to be something like this...”

Suimei slouched back into the sofa and looked up at the ceiling. He felt drained of his strength just knowing that a large scale battle with the demons was now unavoidable. Lefille then turned a knowing look on him.

“Suimei-kun, it seems fate will not allow you to flee from battle.”

“Cut it out, Lefi. Throwing around clichés like that... Honestly.”

“So? Will you dive into the fight by your own will, Suimei-dono?”

“Yes... I’d like to know that... myself.”

“Ugh...”

Suimei had no words for Felmenia and Liliana, only a groan. The five of them talked of trivial matters for a while after that, but Suimei had one more matter to address with Rumeya.

“By the way, forgive me for asking if it’s rude, but could you introduce us to some lodgings we could stay at for a while?”

“Ah, yes. That much is no problem. Let’s see... I know of a good inn, but I should take your financial situation into consideration. There are rooms available in the Twilight Pavilion’s boarding house. How about there? It’s free, you know.”

“If you’re letting us use it, then by all means. We’ll take it.”

Suimei bowed his head a little to show Rumeya his gratitude. He’d only intended to have her introduce them somewhere, but to have the entire matter resolved then and there was more than welcome.

“Speaking of, how long are all of you planning on staying in Miazen?”

“We don’t intend to inconvenience you for too long. Once our business is done, I think we’ll return right away, but...”

“Ah, sorry. My bad. I’m not trying to say you should get out. I was actually thinking it would be better if you could stay here on extended terms.”

“Why’s that?”

“You see, the thing is... Lately in the Alliance—no, not only here, but in Astel and the self-governed state as well—feelings towards the Empire seem to be deteriorating. There’s unrest everywhere. Well, it’s not like things are about to erupt into a fight. At least, not yet. But I was just thinking it might be better if you stayed here rather than the Empire.”

They’d heard something similar from Gaius back in the restaurant at the first Alliance town they visited. In short, opinion of the Empire had taken a turn for the worse in the Alliance. There was no real sign of war on the horizon, but Rumeya was still trying to be considerate out of concern for their safety. She then began puffing at her pipe like she was quite annoyed.

“And then there are those anti-Goddess fanatics, you know? Ugh, they should all just leave. They just *had* to start moving right

around the time of the demon invasion. How annoying...”

This time, she was speaking from her position as a leader of the Twilight Pavilion. It seemed she had a lot on her plate. As she was complaining, Felmenia, Lefille, and Liliana turned to Suimei. He would be the one to decide how they proceeded from here, and they waited patiently to hear his thoughts on the matter.

“So, Suimei, what will you do?” Rumeya eventually asked.

“I’ll decide after observing the situation for myself. At any rate, I left a bunch of tools behind, so I’d at least have to go back to get those.”

“Gotcha. Well, with the skills you all possess, I’m sure there’s nothing to really worry about.”

Judging that saying any more would just be considered meddlesome, Rumeya brought that conversation to an end. After that, she had them tell her all about their journey to her heart’s content.



Taking Rumeya up on her offer, Suimei and the others decided to stay in the available rooms at the Twilight Pavilion’s boarding house. After dropping off their luggage, they relaxed in their own rooms to relieve some of the fatigue of their long journey from the Empire.

The sun fell after dinner, and Suimei was now alone in his room preparing his materials. The room was illuminated by the light from his mana, bright enough that it was comparable to electric lighting. The light itself was colored like a flame, so everything within it was awash in a pale orange glow. While he was working away, Liliana came into the room.

“Suimei... I’m here.”

“Ah, hey. Take a seat on that chair.”

After she entered the room and announced herself, Suimei invited Liliana over to a spare chair in front of the desk. They were now sitting facing each other, much like a doctor and patient in an examination room.

“Now, please take off your eyepatch and gloves.”

Liliana nodded once at Suimei’s doctorly order and quickly complied. What was revealed beneath her gloves was thin, reddish-brown skin covered in bubbles like festering boils. Beneath her

eyepatch were closely packed together reddish-brown scales around her right eye. The eye itself was golden, with the pupil transformed into a long, thin slit.

While Suimei casually examined her arms, Liliana forlornly cast her eyes downward. He had treated her multiple times already since she'd moved in with him and became his travelling companion, but she still had mixed feelings about it. Whenever Suimei looked at her altered features, the same sadness came over her. Just seeing it for herself was painful. Showing it to someone else was even harder.

Suimei gently took Liliana's arm and began applying *magicka* to treat her. Placing his finger on her bumpy, afflicted skin, he began moving it from side to side as if gently brushing the affected region as he recited his chant.

"Buzz, baja, trout, mashia, impose, kashiya, sharurai, arumarai..."

It was Kabbalah magic meant to heal carbuncles—in other words, things like tumors. After continuing this treatment for a time, the demonized portion of her arm seemed to shrink ever so slightly. Suimei then moved on to treating her right eye and the skin around it. Liliana looked up at him anxiously.

"How... is it?"

"The skin on your arms and hands is healing little by little. If we continue treatment at fixed intervals like we have been, it'll eventually heal completely. The skin around your right eye is the same, so that shouldn't be an issue either. It's just..."

"It's just... what?"

"Your eye itself has been completely done in. After being drowned in too much malice, it's no longer a human eye at all. It's transformed into something else altogether."

With a bitter sigh, Suimei told her the truth of the matter. The changes to the outer layer of her body were the result of a form of corruption from using dark magic. She knew that. But being told that her eye was beyond salvation—that it was no longer human—reminded her of each and every horrible time she'd been called a monster. Hearing Suimei's diagnosis, Liliana hung her head low.

"Then... this won't heal... right?"

"Fraid so."

"I see..."

Liliana's voice had gotten quite despondent. It made Suimei realize he'd chosen his words poorly. He had been so absorbed in

concentrating on his magicka that he'd replied mechanically without really thinking about it. Realizing how insensitive that was, he immediately corrected himself in a fluster.

"Sorry, that's not really what I meant to say. It's not that it can't be healed—I just can't do it. Back in my world, there are specialists in spiritual healing and engineers who can manufacture artificial magickal body parts. As soon as we can get back there, you'll be fine."

"Truly?! Then... I can be healed?!" Liliana cried out when she heard the good news, a mix of surprise and happiness in her voice.

It wasn't like Suimei was a specialist in healing techniques, so his knowledge in the field wasn't particularly advanced. Back in his world, however, there were magicians who could heal this level of affliction like it was nothing. If he asked one of them to help Liliana, she could be a normal girl again. But it was that thought that put a sour expression on Suimei's face—not the idea of Liliana getting better, but the idea of having to ask someone for help.

"Yeah, but... The only magician I know who's skilled enough to do it... is that monster of a professor."

An image crept up in the back of Suimei's mind: that mysterious, plump figure sporting a white lab coat, an ominous, faint smile, and mushroom-esque haircut. He was the man that lived in the basement of the old castle that served as the Society's headquarters, and used incomprehensible magicka to produce incomprehensible creations.

Naturally, it wasn't the treatment Suimei was worried about. As far as skill was concerned, the professor was in a league with the best of the best. He was even arguably the best there was period; he certainly wouldn't allow anyone to claim preeminence over him when it came to spiritual healing. So Suimei wasn't concerned in the slightest that the treatment would fail. If anything, he was concerned about it going too well. The probability that the monster professor would throw in something "extra" was frighteningly high. Liliana, however, knew nothing of what might lie ahead of her, and was still happily smiling over the good news.

"What a relief..."

"Y-Yeah... Like I said, you'll be fine. We just have to find a way to return... a way to get back to my world. Until then, I'll focus on healing your skin."

Suimei once more began hypnotically reciting his chant as he

applied his healing magicka. Liliana's expression as he finished up the treatment was far, far brighter than when he first started.

"Alright, we're done."

"Thank you... very much."

"Whoa there..."

Liliana clung to Suimei, practically beaming. Now that she was used to Suimei and the others, she seemed to have developed a penchant for snuggling. It was the same as when she'd clung to Lefille's arm while they were talking to Rumeya. Whenever she was happy or sad now, she would cling to Suimei, Felmenia, or Lefille to show her emotions.

Suimei had heard it through the grapevine that Liliana had always been ostracized by the people around her and that Rogue had never doted on her as a daughter. Since she was never really shown affection, it seemed that when she got emotional, her longing for companionship only increased. Perhaps that was why she held on to people like this. Suimei gently patted her head as she clung on him, and she closed her eyes in a happy smile.



The Saadias Alliance was located in the northwestern part of the continent. It was a federation of five member nations, allegedly named by the swordsmen who drove the demons to the north and liberated the territory for the people. At the center of it was the sovereign state of Miazen, the home of several members of the Seven Swords. Many of the swordsmen from the allied armies also called it their home, so among the five member nations of the Alliance, it was considered the most powerful.

Thanks to that, aspiring heroes gathered here to devote themselves to the study of the sword. On the western side of the river that split the city in two, there was training yard after training yard for both citizens and soldiers alike. The neighborhoods were also dotted with blacksmiths' shops. Someone had to supply all of the swordsmen with their weapons, after all. In short, it seemed the entire city lived and breathed the way of the sword.

And the day after arriving in Miazen, Suimei's party of four was headed to the west side of town. Walking over the bridge that connected the two parts of the city, Suimei made an observation out loud to the rest of his group.

“How do I put it...? Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves here.”

The city was indeed overflowing with excitement and energy. Joyful voices could be heard near and far, as if the whole town were reveling.

“I learned of it this morning, Suimei-dono, but it seems the hero’s parade is today.”

“Ah, yeah, now that you mention it...”

As they were leaving, Rumeiya had mentioned something about it. They were apparently holding the sudden event in honor of the Alliance’s hero, who had recently dealt a serious blow to the demon army and defeated a demon general. It was indeed cause for celebration. The locals were hardly able to contain themselves.

“It seems the parade will be held in the afternoon. What shall we do, Suimei-dono? Would you like to go and see it?”

“Sounds like a good idea. That kinda thing is nice once in a while.”

Suimei nodded at Felmenia’s suggestion. This would actually be the first time he’d really seen a hero’s parade. Back during Reiji’s, he’d only stayed long enough to see his friends off. And during Elliot’s parade in the Empire, he’d been so busy with the coma incidents that he hadn’t been able to attend at all.

“But that means we’ve still got time until it starts, right?” asked Suimei.

“Then let us proceed as planned and have a look around until then,” suggested Lefille.

Everyone agreed, and they all moved forward into the western part of the city as a group. While walking around looking for a place to kill time, they came across a shop with a somewhat gaudy exterior. As soon as it came into view, one of the group excitedly raised their voice.

“Ooh, this store is...!” exclaimed Lefille.

The shop in question was a clothing store that also seemed to carry various other goods and novelties. Since everything on display in the shop window was adorable, it seemed the store was largely trying to appeal to women. There were similar shops in the imperial capital, and this one was in no way inferior in selection and scale. They had a wealth of goods in store, and even boasted complete sets of similarly themed items. When he took a careful look at the display window, the lightbulb came on for Suimei.

“Ah, it’s *that* kind of place, huh? Like that clothing store from before...”

The store closely resembled the clothier he and Lefille had visited in Kurant City. Back when they were shopping for her in her smaller form, they’d had to buy dresses for little girls in order to get anything that would fit properly. The shop they’d visited in Astel was stocked with the latest fashions from the Saadias Alliance, so it seemed like this must be the flagship store. To be able to set up a foreign branch like that in such an undeveloped world was a strong indication of their profitability. And the shop here, just like the one in Kurant City, had frilly dresses of all sizes and colors on display. Taking it all in, Suimei turned to Lefille.

“Do you... want to go in?”

“What?! No, I don’t particularly... but...”

Or so she said, but her eyes kept darting back to the shop window. Seeing her like this, an impish grin crept over Suimei’s lips.

“You can’t wear kid’s clothes anymore, you know?”

“Nobody said anything about wearing children’s clothing!”

“No? You never know... You might end up small again sometime. It could come in handy then.”

“Shut up! I can’t hear you!”

While the two were having this exchange, Felmenia suddenly ran up behind the two of them and excitedly called out to Suimei.

“Suimei-dono! Let us go to that store!”

“What? You like that kind of stuff too, Menia?”

“I do!”

Felmenia was practically bursting at the seams with enthusiasm. As Suimei thought, it seemed this kind of cutesy store had a certain appeal for most girls. Lefille was likely only protesting because she really did want to go in too.

“Well, shall we go and take a look around?”

“I-I suppose I don’t have a choice. If everyone is going, I’ll come along.”

Lefille’s voice faltered a little as she feigned resignation about going. She and Suimei then began walking towards the store together, but a questioning voice came from behind them.

“...Suimei-dono? Lefille? Where are the two of you going? It is over here, right? This one.”

“Huh?”

“Oh...?”

Suimei and Lefille turned around at Felmenia’s behest. She had been facing the same direction they were, so they’d just assumed she meant that she wanted to go to the clothing store too. They were very, very wrong. She was currently pointing towards a dubious storefront that practically radiated sketchiness.

“Come, both of you! Let us hurry!”

But in stark contrast to the creepy aura the store gave off, Felmenia was beaming. There seemed to be a complete disconnect between them. There was zero indication there was anything about the store that should make a lady smile like that.

“Th-There? That one? Really? Seriously?”

“Indeed! Behold the gloomy atmosphere, the likes of which cannot be found in all Astel or even the Empire! Take a deep breath and inhale the suspicious odors of unknown medicinal herbs! Just look at the plethora of goods with magic words engraved on them in the window! How could you not be excited?!”

Felmenia passionately implored Suimei, who was staring at her like he hardly understood what she was saying. After listening to her and taking a closer look at the store, he did indeed see that they were selling a wealth of magicka items—or magic tools, as they were called here. But unlike Felmenia, he wasn’t taken with excitement.

“Suimei-dono? Why are you making such an odd face? Is something the matter?”

“It’s...”

“It’s what? Do you find it strange?”

“I-I mean...”

Sensing Suimei’s hesitation, Felmenia turned her question to Liliana instead.

“Lily, what do you think about it?”

“L-Liliana? It’s weird, isn’t it? Right?”

Suimei was looking for someone to agree with him, but...

“Is it?”

“Huh...?”

“Just as Felmenia said... it seems... quite interesting.”

Suimei then realized that, just like Felmenia, Liliana’s eye was sparkling.

“You see?! It is just as I thought! There isn’t a mage in the world who wouldn’t tremble with excitement at such a grand

sight!"

"Is Suimei... different?"

"No, well, I am little interested in it, but..."

As a magician, Suimei also had a natural curiosity in mystical goods. But regardless of the circumstances, he'd never guessed the girls would get so excited about something like this. As Suimei stood there completely baffled by it all, a solid, reassuring pat fell on his shoulder.

"It's alright. Your reaction is perfectly normal, Suimei-kun."

"R-Right?"

Lefille too was making a complicated expression like she was beholding something beyond her comprehension. It seemed she and Suimei were on the same page, and he was relieved common sense was on his side here.

"Anyway, Suimei-dono, let us go inside!"

"Yes... I would like... to go in as well."

"...Alright, in we go then."

With Felmenia tugging on one arm and Liliana tugging on the other, the three of them entered the shop together and Lefille followed close behind. Suimei had gone shopping for magickal goods in the Empire, so it wasn't the first time he'd been in a shop like this, but this one in particular smelled of incense. Back in his own world, this type of store would often use incense with a pleasant smell to entice customers. But that wasn't the case here; the scent reminded him more of the incense used during funerals.

The shop's clerk, who was blankly standing behind the counter, seemed to have no interest in actually helping customers. But it was just as well. Before Suimei knew it, Felmenia and Liliana were already browsing the shelves of goods and books, and picking out medicinal herbs and magic staffs.

Much like the stores Suimei had visited in the Empire, the magic tools sold here came in all different manner of styles, and seemed to prize form over function. In this world, they were items meant to be shown off, after all. Whereas Suimei was used to regular accessories being made into magickal items, this world made magickal items into accessories. As Suimei was contemplating this, Felmenia called out to him.

"Look, Suimei-dono! I've found something quite interesting!"

He looked over and saw that she was holding something as she bounced up and down and waved to get his attention. Seeing what

was in her hand, however, the blood drained from Suimei's face.

"A-A stuffed doll..."

"Is something the matter?"

"No..."

Suimei unconsciously groaned as he looked at the old-fashioned doll in her grasp. Felmenia simply cocked her head to the side in puzzlement at this reaction. Back in his own world, Suimei had a partner who'd made a doll of him once... It was a terrible memory for him. Ever since then, whenever he saw small, cutesy stuffed dolls, he shuddered to recall it. It was a struggle he'd rather not remember.

After managing something of a reply to Felmenia, Suimei looked around to see what Lefille and Liliana were up to. Lefille, who was not familiar with magical items, was looking around the store with an unmistakable grimace on her face. Meanwhile, Liliana was flipping through a grimoire. When he turned back, Felmenia had shifted her attention to a glass display case filled with accessories. She was probably looking at amulets and talismans. She wasn't the type of mage who used a staff, so she was particularly interested in other kinds of magic accessories like jewelry. Looking at her closely, Suimei could see her eyes sparkling as she admired the contents of the case. She'd had no interest whatsoever in the clothing store next door, but it at least seemed that there were certain girly things that did tickle her fancy.

"Menia, if there's something that catches your eye, shall I buy it for you?"

"!"

"W-Would you, Suimei-dono?!"

Felmenia gasped in excitement and happily accepted his offer. Suimei could have sworn Lefille shot a surprised look his way, but he must have been imagining it. She was looking the other way when he looked up at her.

"Then, um, how about this one?"

"Yeah, sure."

Felmenia reservedly pointed at a brooch with a blue gem in it, and Suimei nodded. After calling the clerk to retrieve it from the case, he paid for it and handed it over to Felmenia. Grinning from ear to ear, Felmenia held it lovingly in both hands.

"A gift from Suimei-dono... Teehee."

"Do you like it?"

“Heeheehee...”

“Yooohoo, earth to Menia!”

Even when he waved his hand in front of her face, she didn’t reply. It seemed she’d gone on an extended trip into her own head.

“Hmm... What about you, Liliana? Is there something you want?”

“There isn’t... anything in particular... I’m dying to have.”

With that, Liliana continued to leisurely browse the store. As she walked off, Suimei heard something strange behind him. It sounded like shuffling.

“...?”

Looking for the source of the noise, Suimei spied Lefille as she approached. She slowly shuffled closer inch by inch. Suimei watched her with a puzzled expression, wondering if she’d gotten tired or something.

“S-Suimei-kun?”

“What’s up?”

Lefille cleared her throat and summoned a stern voice as if she meant to reprimand him.

“A-Ahem... I don’t think that it’s fair for you to only buy something for Lady Felmenia.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed!”

“Do you want something, Lefi? I did buy you those clothes back in Kurant City, didn’t I?”

“Th-That’s true, but...”

“I have my wallet to think of, you know. If you want something, I’m sorry, but this time you’ll have to manage on your own...”

Suimei scratched his head as he apologized, but Lefille still stuck to her guns.

“B-But before we left the Empire, didn’t you buy Lily a parasol?!”

“Yeah. She can’t use dark magic now, so that was to try and make up for the difference, even if only a little bit.”

Before leaving for the Alliance, Suimei had purchased Liliana a parasol that suited her rather well. While she was receiving treatment, it would play the role of a magic staff and allow her to use simple magicka. With her decreased ability to defend herself without her dark magic, Suimei considered it a necessity for their

journey. But despite that, Lefille still looked at him with envious eyes. He didn't understand why.

"What's wrong all of a sudden? It's not like there's anything you'd really want here, is there?"

"Th-That's not true, I'll have you know. After looking around, I got interested in some things. Really, really interested."

"What...?"

"Th-That's right! Like... How about this?!"

In a fluster, Lefille grabbed the closest thing that caught her eye. It was a dried object of some sort...

"Hey, wait, isn't that an animal's cock? Just what are you going to use that for?"

"It's a what...? UWAAAAAAAAAH!"

Upon realizing exactly what she was holding in her hand, Lefille fell into a panic. After flailing about the store for a good minute, she hurried back over to Suimei. Refusing to give up, however, she picked up something else.

"Th-Then... this!"

What she had in her hand now looked like a container for cosmetics. Suimei took it and gave it a sniff.

"This... is probably an aphrodisiac salve."

"...Never mind."

Lefille hung her head low in defeat. It seemed she couldn't pick out something good to save her life.

"Yeah, as I thought, you should give it a rest. This store just isn't your pace, Lefi."

"Hmph... You're just a bully, Suimei-kun..."

"How did this come back on me?"

Looking up at him with resentment, Lefille was fussing at him like she would when she was smaller. Suimei couldn't grasp why she wanted something so badly that she'd take it this far. With a much better grasp on what Lefille was going through, however, Liliana tapped on Lefille's shoulder.

"Lefille, next time... let's go to a different store. You can ask Suimei... to buy you something there. Right, Felmenia?"

"That's right! Heehee..."

Felmenia replied without even really hearing the question. She still hadn't come back to reality yet. Ultimately, it was somewhat strange that the youngest among them, Liliana, was the most levelheaded.

“Alright! Then the next store will surely be...”

Tightly clenching her fist, it seemed Lefille was suddenly filled with determination. Oblivious as ever, the out-of-touch Suimei still had no idea what was going on. His attention was pulled away from the matter, however, when he realized that the hustle and bustle had increased substantially outside.

“It’s gotten pretty lively out there.”

Lefille drew closer to the store’s window to take a look for herself.

“The parade is probably about to start. People are moving towards the main street.”

“Well then, shall we go too?”

The girls agreed, so the four of them took their leave from the store and made their way toward one of the streets the Alliance’s hero would be passing down. The parade was just about to get started. The roads were perfectly clear for the procession, and the sidewalks were packed to the gills with people, people, and more people.

“Wow, there’s one hell of a crowd. I guess it was like that in the Empire too...” remarked Suimei as he looked on in astonishment.

“There certainly is an impressive number of people in attendance. It is in no way inferior to Reiji-dono’s parade,” replied Felmenia.

“Now that you mention it,” said Lefille. “It was quite the crowd there, wasn’t it?”

It sounded like she was remembering the parade like she’d been there herself. Suimei was holed up in the castle for most of it, but Lefille had likely seen it before they met up. She spoke of it admiringly, but also sounded a bit distant.

“Everyone. It seems... the event is starting,” said Liliana.

“Yeah?” asked Suimei.

“Yes. They’re coming... from over there. The leading party is a group of four... the hero and her companions.”

Liliana pointed down the street. She had extremely sharp hearing, and had heard the approaching parade before anyone else. Lefille now sensed the strong presences of the hero and her party, and squinted her eyes to make them out in the brilliant afternoon sunshine.

“They’re approaching. They should be here soon.”

“Oh! I can see the leading carriage!”

Just as Felmenia let out a squeal of excitement, a portion of the gathered masses also began shouting for joy. And soon enough, a well-guarded escort carriage came into view. Following shortly behind it was a festival float being pulled by a cowhorn. It had no roof to make it easier for the crowd to see its passenger... which was a large man waving at the people.

“Huh?! That geezer?!”

Seeing an unexpectedly familiar face, Suimei couldn't help shouting out in surprise. Atop the float was the tall, dark-skinned man they'd met at their first stop in the Alliance: Gaius Forvan.

“That's... Forvan, right?”

“Wha...? That geezer was seriously one of the hero's companions?”

Suimei stood there blankly, mouth agape and eyes wide open. Felmenia observed this curiously. She wasn't sure what Suimei was so surprised about.

“Suimei-dono, did you not believe Forvan's story?”

“Only about half of it.”

He didn't think Gaius was lying about fighting against the demons, but he didn't really think he was one of the hero's companions. Suimei figured that it was more likely that he was just a soldier who'd been in the hero's company, but...

“But seriously, that geezer is really in high spirits.”

“Indeed he is. He seems to be having a lot of fun... Um, like, *really* a lot.”

Felmenia forced an awkward smile. Gaius was enthusiastically smiling and eagerly waving at everybody. He was an especially gregarious man, so it wasn't exactly out of character for him, but it was quite a sight to see a man his age behaving that way. There was just something about an older gentleman overcome with excitement on a festival float that was embarrassing to watch. Suimei had thought something similar back when they met at the restaurant, but he really seemed like the type of guy to ride his own hype.

The festival float behind Gaius's came into sight shortly after. On top of it was a person wearing a green robe with a hood. Their face was completely concealed by the hood, but judging from their figure, it was probably a woman. She was holding a staff made of black wood with a large gem at the end in one hand and waving in a mild-mannered fashion with the other.

“A mage?”

“Probably. Her robe and that type of staff are fairly standard gear for mages in the self-governed state. Though this is the first time I’ve seen such a large jewel embedded in one...”

Felmenia confirmed Suimei’s suspicions as she curiously observed the staff. So far, the parade was exactly what one would expect of a hero’s party—a martial artist bulging with muscles and a stoic mage.

And the next float didn’t disappoint either. It carried a young swordsman who appeared to be somewhere in his teens. He seemed rather accustomed to this sort of event, and held a perfect smile on his charming face as he engaged the people. Based on the fancy clothing he was wearing, Suimei guessed he must be someone of high social standing. Observing him with her lone, sleepy-looking eye, Liliana announced his identity to the rest of the group.

“The first prince of Miazén... Weitzer Ryerzen.”

“My, one of the Seven Swords? To think he would also fight as one of the hero’s companions...”

It seemed Lefille recognized the name.

“A looker, huh? A prince who’s strong, famous, *and* good-looking is just winning at life too much... Like, seriously, that’s cheating. What a scam.”

Suimei looked on at him enviously, but everyone’s attention quickly turned to the next approaching float. The fourth and final float should be carrying the summoned hero of the Alliance.

“So what’s our hero going to be like?”

“Gaius-dono said that she was a beautiful woman, no?”

“Indeed he did.”

“Suimei... there. The last float.”

“Ooh, you’re right... Huh?”

Suimei turned to look as soon as Liliana said something, but let out a puzzled voice when he saw the float.

He doubted his eyes.

For atop the last float was someone very, very familiar to him. It was indeed a woman, just like they’d heard, but she was wearing the uniform from a high school in Suimei’s neighborhood. She was clad in a short skirt with white garters, and donned a scarlet, plated armguard with the mask of an oni fashioned on top of it. She had long, blonde hair that flowed down her back, which was parted to one side and kept up with a ribbon. Her jade green eyes and long eyelashes gave her a youthful look, but based on the way she

carried herself, there was no mistaking her strength.

Suimei could hear a wave of sighs from the crowd, all likely in admiration of her beauty. She waved to the crowd with one hand, and in the other, she held a long, curved sword known to Suimei as an uchigatana. It was all so familiar, but no matter how much he stared, all he could think was...

There's no way she could be here...

Indeed, Suimei knew this girl from his own world. It was unthinkable that she'd somehow ended up in this one. Trying to deny what he was seeing with his own eyes, Suimei shook his head violently. He couldn't believe this was happening, both as her friend and as someone who'd been forcibly summoned to this world himself.

"What are the odds...?"

To think that not just Reiji and Mizuki, but yet another of his acquaintances had been summoned here... It wasn't like it was absolutely impossible, but the probability was astronomically low. It wasn't something that could have just happened by coincidence.

"Suimei-dono?"

Seeing the consternation that had crept over Suimei's face, Felmenia called out to him. But Suimei had no time to explain. Paying no mind to his surroundings, he shouted at the top of his lungs towards the festival float.

"Hey, Hatsumi! It's me! Hatsumiiii! Can she not hear me over this ruckus...? Fuck!"

His voice was drowned out by the crowd, and didn't reach the girl on the float—Kuchiba Hatsumi. Suimei cursed out of irritation at things not going his way, but there was no way he'd just give up there. He once more tried calling out to her, and then, finally, her eyes fell on him in the crowd of people.

"Hatsumi..."

But even though she looked right at him, she didn't seem to notice him. She just continued looking through the crowd and waving.

"Huh...?"

Suimei was sure she'd be stunned to see him. Surely she should have called out to him the moment she saw a familiar face. But no... His expectations completely betrayed, Suimei stood there stock-still, dumbfounded in the face of the cruel reality he was forced to confront. Seeing him acting strangely, both Felmenia and Lefille

called out to him.

“Suimei-dono? Just what is the matter?”

“That’s quite the expression you have...”

But their anxious voices fell on deaf ears. Suimei couldn’t hear them right now. His head was somewhere else.

What was going on? How did this happen? Those questions spun in Suimei’s mind like a dark whirlpool that consumed all his other thoughts for a while. When he finally came back to his senses, he lifted his head and looked over at his companions.

“Uh... Let’s go back to the Twilight Pavilion for now. I’ll explain there.”

Chapter 2: Relation of the Summoned

“So the hero from the Alliance that was just in the parade...”

“Is Suimei-dono’s acquaintance?!”

Lefille and Felmenia’s shocked voices resounded throughout the room. After the hero’s victory parade, Suimei and the others gathered in the guild master’s office at the Twilight Pavilion. Suimei was now seated on the sofa with a profoundly grim expression on his face.

“There’s no mistaking that that girl was my childhood friend Kuchiba Hatsumi. To think that she got summoned too...”

Suimei answered the girls with a heavy sigh. Felmenia and the others were all completely astonished at the uncanny coincidence that Suimei was suggesting: he knew the Alliance hero from his own world.

“So not only did you get swallowed into your best friend’s summoning, but now your childhood friend’s been summoned here too? You’ve really gotten tangled in some hapless fate here, haven’t you?”

Unsure whether it was just dumb luck or the influence of the stars, Rumeya simply stared at Suimei in wonder with one eye shut as she puffed on her pipe. It really was just as she said. Suimei could think of no better way to describe it than “hapless fate.” There had to be something binding the people who’d been summoned to this world together—that’s what Suimei’s gut was now telling him. Pondering all this, Lefille recalled Suimei’s earlier actions.

“So that’s why you were yelling like that?”

“Yeah. I was trying to get her attention, but... I don’t get it. She didn’t react at all.”

“Could it be that it’s not really her, just someone who looks like her?”

“No. I mean, if it were just her looks, I might think that, but the clothes she’s wearing are a dead giveaway. Not to mention she has the same name.”

“Hatsumi Kuchiba, right? It’s true that the names match...”

“Yeah...”

Suimei was groaning at his wits’ end. Liliana then put her doubt into words.

“Couldn’t it simply be... that she didn’t hear you?”

“Maybe, but I swear our eyes met. She looked right at me. I find it hard to believe she didn’t recognize me then.”

“But it’s possible... there were just so many people... that she just overlooked you... right?”

“You think so? Maybe that’s all it was...”

Suimei nodded as if to convince himself. Just as Liliana said, there had been so many on the street earlier that it was genuinely possible she hadn’t been able to pick him out of the crowd. And nothing was going to be gained by fretting about it.

“I’m going to have to meet with her and see for myself.”

Hearing Suimei’s declaration, Rumeya managed to guess what was coming next.

“And that’s why you came to talk to me, right?”

“Yes. As a guild master, I thought you might be able to arrange a meeting with the hero.”

Even if Suimei was an old friend of hers, to the people of the Alliance, he was a nobody. It was difficult to imagine that they’d let just any civilian have an audience with the hero. That’s why he’d chosen to come to Rumeya, someone of importance in the community. He thought they might be able to get somewhere with her title. But contrary to his hopes, Rumeya shook her head sullenly.

“Sorry, that would be a little difficult.”

“Difficult... how?”

“Well, you see... According to the royal family, the hero doesn’t like to go out much. It hasn’t been all that long since she was summoned, so it seems she’s still rather unused to this world. The royal family doesn’t want her to get overwhelmed, so audiences with her have been prohibited.”

“I see... So is that why you haven’t met her yet either, Rumeya-dono?”

“You guessed it. The royal family of Miazen is quite high-strung about anything and everything concerning the hero. Even if I pulled all the strings I could and threw around my weight, I doubt they’d let us see her.”

“That seems strange after letting her fight and making her participate in a parade.”

“Doesn’t it? I honestly don’t know what they’re thinking either.”

Rumeya completely agreed with Suimei. It seemed she had her own suspicions on the matter, and continued to puff away on her pipe with a dissatisfied expression. It was Felmenia who timidly spoke up next.

“So the hero from the Alliance is your, um... good friend, right, Suimei-dono? Does that mean she’s... on your mind?”

“Well, yeah.”

When Suimei smiled, Rumeya flashed a wicked grin.

“Oh? Goodness me, what a ladykiller. You’re already practically drowning in beautiful women, yet you’re still on the prowl for a new catch? You’re a bad boy, aren’t you?” she said, twirling her pipe around the end of her finger.

“Wha...? N-No! That’s really not...”

Naturally, Suimei had no such intentions and readily denied her accusation, but Felmenia and Lefille weren’t so convinced. Felmenia leaped towards him while Lefille cast a cold, terrifying look his way.

“S-Suimei-dono, is that true?! Are those really your intentions?!”

“Suimei-kun, it seems you and I need to have a long, *long* talk.”

“Calm down, Menia! I just— Wait, Lefille... why are you looking at me like that?”

Suimei was reeling at the sudden change in their attitudes. Rumeya got a hearty laugh out of it.

“Well, all joking aside...”

“After throwing me under the bus like that? You got some nerve...”

Suimei glared at Rumeya, the resentment obvious in his eyes. But she merely returned a foxy smile, as though she’d found some new toy to play with.

“Suimei, it’s quite amusing to tease you, you know? Surely people did this to you, even in the world you hail from.”

“Urgh...”

“Hahaha! That must mean I hit the bullseye! Seems that’s just your lot in life, my dear.”

Rumeya continued laughing, thoroughly amused with Suimei.

As he lamented in his heart that he'd made yet another enemy, the smile suddenly disappeared from her face as she regained her composure and looked at him seriously.

"So, she's on your mind because she's your friend?"

"Yes. I've known her since I was very young. That's why I want to check on her. I don't know for sure that she isn't being forced to fight against her will, after all."

"Hmm..."

It seemed Rumea hadn't considered that possibility. The people of this world by and large took for granted that the heroes came to save them. Of course they would be willing to fight. The idea that that might not be the case never even crossed most of their minds. For Suimei, however, it was a natural enough worry.

Moreover, he still couldn't quite get his head around why Reiji and Elliot had taken up such a baffling stance on this hero business. It made no sense to him, and he didn't think he'd get to the bottom of it until he took a serious look into it for himself. Talking to Hatsumi might prove to be a good start. After calming down a bit, Felmenia cocked her head to the side and raised a question as to how exactly he'd go about doing that.

"But what will you do, Suimei-dono? If we cannot make an appointment with her directly, do you have some other way to reach her?"

"Well, if it comes to that, I do have a card up my sleeve..."

While stroking his chin, Suimei shifted his focus to the window. Night—the magician's day—was just about to fall. If Suimei couldn't get in touch with Hatsumi by normal means, he'd have to get creative.



Kuchiba Hatsumi suddenly felt a jolt run through her body.

"Hmm...?"

She slowly stirred from a deep slumber, and when she opened her eyes, she saw her companion Selphy Fittney leaning over her.

"Please wake up, Hatsumi. It's already nighttime."

"Evening...?"

While rubbing her sleepy eyes, she straightened herself up and looked around. She was on top of a bed in the private room that had been set aside for her on the fourth floor of Miazen's palace.

The furnishings were kept to a bare minimum, with only the bed and a dresser for clothing. A dark carpet spread across the floor, and a wide courtyard could be seen from the window. These were the frugal lodgings the royal family had allotted her.

Her face concealed by her hood, Selphy quietly continued to speak to Hatsumi.

“Indeed, Hatsumi. You worked hard today.”

“...I fell asleep?”

“Yes, you were out like a light. You must have been having a good dream, though. Your sleeping face was very peaceful.”

“Augh...”

Hatsumi couldn't hide her bashfulness at the thought of someone seeing her sleeping face. Her cheeks turned bright red, but rather than trying to embarrass her, Selphy was being somewhat affectionate. Hatsumi couldn't see her face due to the shadow, but she felt like Selphy was smiling underneath that hood of hers.

“What kind of dream were you having? Do you remember?”

“My dream...?”

She tried to recall its contents. And sure enough...

“...I dreamt I was a small child. In a place different from here. I was racing a boy and horsing around with him.”

“The same dream as always, then?”

Hatsumi nodded towards Selphy's gentle voice. She had no memories of her previous life, but it was a dream she had often. In it, she was a small child, and she was with a boy about her age. They would play around and swing swords together. She had no evidence to prove it, but she thought it must be a fragment of her past.

But then...

But then partway through, it shifted to a strange dream. There was a stray dog. She was running from it, but fell and hurt herself. The boy chased it off for her. Then he recited a good luck charm to heal her wounds. And at last, he said...

“Whenever you're in danger, I'll come save you.”

The boy's face was completely hazy in her mind. She couldn't remember it clearly. But when she recalled those words of his, there was a faint ache in her chest. It felt like the pang of loneliness that came after losing something.

Setting the matter of the dream aside, Hatsumi was surprised at herself. She'd only intended to take a quick nap, but she'd

completely passed out. Somewhat disoriented, she turned to her companion.

“Selphy, just how long was I asleep?”

“I told you it’s nighttime already. You were out for quite a while.”

“Man, I really slept that much...? We were supposed to have that strategic meeting this evening, weren’t we?”

“Indeed we were.”

“Aw man...”

After Hatsumi and her companions had dinner after the parade, they decided to take a short break before meeting to discuss how they should proceed in regards to the demon subjugation. Hatsumi, as the leader, had suggested they reconvene in an hour for said meeting, but looking out the window now, it was pitch black outside. Her little post-dinner nap had lasted for well over two hours.

“The hour has gotten quite late, so I came to wake you.”

“It would’ve been fine if you’d done so earlier.”

“No, you seemed quite tired, so I thought it would be best to let you rest.”

“Thank you, Selphy. So, where are Gaius and Weitzer?”

“They’re waiting in the next room over.”

“I see. Then let’s hurry—”

Before Hatsumi could finish her sentence, she could hear antsy footsteps from the hallway. It was Gaius; he must have sensed that she had woken up. And just as Hatsumi realized who was approaching, the door to her room burst open without so much as a knock.

“Yoohoo! Is the little sleepyhead hero awake yet?”

That door must have been nothing but a single sheet of veneer to him. As it banged open like it had been punched, a burly, musclebound man with an affable smile came marching in and plunked right down on a chair like it belonged to him. Selphy’s eyes glinted reproachfully from under her hood.

“Sir Gaius, what are you doing entering a woman’s room without even knocking?”

“Aw, what’s the big deal? She was just sleeping in the clothes she usually wears, right? If she were immodestly dressed, I’m sure you’d have done something about it already.”

“Well, that much is certainly true. I would have started by

firing a spell at you.”

“Oooh, scary.”

Gaius grabbed both his shoulders and pretended to shiver in fright. Though he didn't think of it that way, he was quite a droll man. Hatsumi, however, didn't really mind Gaius's impolite behavior. She lightly bowed her head to him from atop her bed.

“I'm sorry, Gaius. I overslept.”

“That's rare for you.”

“I think doing something new must have tired me out...”

Hatsumi spoke timidly. It had come up during dinner as well, but that afternoon had been her first experience with a parade. For half a day, she had to stand atop a cowhorn-drawn float while waving and smiling at the cheering crowds. It was a lot more difficult than she'd thought.

“Ah, yeah, I get you there. Even *my* beautiful shoulders are stiff after all that.”

Gaius was rubbing his shoulder while making a bitter face. Even though he was a rather worldly man, it seemed he wasn't used to such things either. Hatsumi had thought he looked like he was having quite a lot of fun during the parade, but it seemed perhaps that wasn't the case after all. As they were talking about all this, a young man wearing an exquisite knight's outfit came through the still-open door. And the first thing that came out of his mouth was...

“Gaius. Just what are you thinking, marching into the hero's room on your own like that?”

Glaring at Gaius out of the corner of his eye, the newcomer criticized him in a sharp tone. It was Weitzer Ryerzen, prince of Miazen. Gaius, however, sat there unfazed, digging around his ear with his pinky finger while he waited for the prince to stop talking.

“What? You gonna lecture me too? Like I said, what's the big deal? I could hear them talking and all, so I knew she was awake. Come on, already. I wanna get the depressing talk out of the way so I can go get some booze.”

“Are you saying you're more concerned with spirits than the peace of the world?”

“Sure am.”

Gaius struck his chest proudly, not hesitating to answer. Pinching his brow in displeasure at such arrogance, Weitzer judged that any further conversation with such an oaf would be unproductive. With a much softened expression, he turned to

Hatsumi instead to greet her.

"I deeply apologize for being so boisterous when you've just awoken, Hero-dono. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you. And I'm sorry for making you wait."

"Not at all. You must still be fatigued from battle. We're the ones repeatedly dragging you into combat, after all. So I implore you to think nothing of it, Hero-dono."

"Yeah..."

Weitzer made it a point to be courteous so as not to make Hatsumi uncomfortable. As always, he was quite the gentleman. Hatsumi, knowing what serious conversation lay ahead of them, went to get up from the bed. Selphy moved to lend her a hand as she rose, but Weitzer held her back for some reason.

"Selphy, leave this to me."

"...Very well."

Selphy questioned Weitzer's actions for a moment, but quickly came to a realization and gracefully resigned herself. Seeing this exchange left Hatsumi puzzled as Weitzer drew closer.

"W-Weitzer?"

"Now then, Hero-dono, please take my hand."

"Huh? Oh... Th-Thank you..."

Weitzer extended his hand to Hatsumi for support. Worried about her, he smiled at her gently to encourage her. Hatsumi bashfully looked away as she thanked him. This kind of behavior was fairly common for him, but it was still quite embarrassing. Nevertheless, she took his hand and stood up. Their other two companions were quietly laughing like something was most amusing.

"Ah, so the prince is goin' on the offensive, eh?"

"Heh..."

Weitzer escorted Hatsumi over to where they were sitting.

"Hero-dono, how did you enjoy tonight's dinner?"

"Well, the food was delicious, but..."

"Was there something about it you weren't pleased with?"

"That's not it. It's just that dealing with that kind of atmosphere isn't easy. Ah, but I don't mean to say I dislike being around His and Her Majesty, understand?"

Hatsumi actually got along fairly well not just with the king and queen, but with everyone in the palace. Yet even then, it made her anxious to dine under such pomp and circumstance. She was

never able to fully relax with all the formalities. She wasn't sure how Weitzer had interpreted what she said about it, but he replied with the air of a know-it-all.

"But of course. You've lost your memory, after all. I'm sure, after some time, things will come back to you and you'll be much more comfortable under such circumstances."

"That's not really what I mean though..."

"You will get used to it soon, Hero-dono. I think it's already growing on you. Your manners at the dinner table are always impeccable, after all."

"Y-Yeah..."

Hatsumi could only muster an awkward reply to Weitzer's praise. She didn't understand how he could flatter her like that with such a straight face. After taking her seat, she caught a glimpse of Gaius grinning. Selphy too was stifling a laugh. She wasn't sure what was so funny.

"I see the two of you behave this way from time to time... but what is it?"

"Ah, it's nothing."

"Indeed. We were just making small talk."

The two of them seemed in rather good spirits. Weitzer, on the other hand, looked rather offended, though that only made Gaius smile more. He waited for Weitzer to take a seat before addressing him.

"So, what'll we do from here?"

"I don't really think there is anything *to* do."

"Aw, come on, don't be like that. You angry about something?"

"Certainly not."

Despite what he said, Weitzer did seem irritated. Cutting into their little exchange, Hatsumi got the conversation back on track.

"It's a matter of course that we'll continue subjugating the demons, but how shall we proceed from here?"

"Ain't it fine just to link up with the soldiers and march on the bastards like usual?"

"I also think it is a good idea to proceed as we have been, Hero-dono."

In a strange turn of events, Weitzer agreed with Gaius. And if the two of them were united, it had to mean it was a solid plan. However, Hatsumi had different thoughts on the matter.

"That may be, but..."

“You thinkin’ about something else, Hatsumi?”

“Yeah. Since we have this kind of war potential, I was thinking that there’s probably a better way to use it. I mean, we’ve already raised the soldiers’ morale considerably with a big victory. And morale only gets but so high, right? So I was thinking it might be better to leave the battlefield to the generals from here on out.”

“Huh?”

Gaius didn’t quite follow, but Weitzer seemed to grasp her proposition immediately.

“In other words, you’re saying it would be better for us to move against the demons independently now.”

“Yeah, I was thinking it’s a possibility. We could make a surprise attack against the demon generals or something. Though it may be a dangerous play...”

“Certainly. But if it is a success, then the burden on the soldiers would be lightened remarkably.”

Their party was peerless in terms of strength and potential on the battlefield. They had three members who could each fight against the demons head-on, and one who could support them from the rear lines perfectly. As a group, they were also well-suited for covert operations. If they could take the initiative now and eliminate the demon generals and other influential demons, they could claim a real victory for humanity in this war.

“Knowing that, we’ll only proceed this way if everyone’s willing.”

Just as Hatsumi’s apprehensions indicated, it was indeed a dangerous plan. It would put a great deal of pressure on all four of them. However, Weitzer answered her confidently as if it were only natural.

“But of course. We intend to follow you wherever, Hero-dono.”

“Even if you’re okay with it, there’s still Gaius and Selphy to consider. They both have their own countries to worry about. You don’t make decisions for them, so don’t try and speak for them. Besides, frankly speaking, I’m not completely decided on this plan yet either.”

“M-My apologies...”

After being rebuked, Weitzer apologized in an uncharacteristic fluster. It seemed the pointed nature of her harsh words had gotten to him. But while he was still reeling over his blunder, Gaius gave his own confident answer.

"I don't mind at all. I'm tired of getting stalled, anyways. Danger is just what I want."

"I shall also accompany you. I have no intention of abandoning my duty after we've come this far," Selphy added.

"Thank you. Both of you."

The two of them—or really, all three of them—were rather promising. Hatsumi expressed her gratitude for their dedication, but Gaius looked at her as though he'd seen something odd.

"At any rate, Hatsumi, you weren't like this before. I'm surprised you got so pumped up."

It seemed he was surprised by her sudden proposal for an aggressive move. When she first came to this world, she refused to have anything to do with the subjugation and locked herself away in her room from the shock of losing her memories. Gaius was likely comparing the way she was now to the way she was then, but...

"You promised not to bring that up, didn't you? Jeez... Nothing's changed. I just know we need to defeat the demons now."

After fighting the demons for herself, Hatsumi realized what must be done. Perhaps it was their strength, their malicious intent, their sinister auras... She just knew in her heart of hearts that they were an evil that must be vanquished. Moreover, she wanted to protect the people of this world—including the three companions who fought alongside her. They were important to her.

"Hey, Selphy, is there anything we need to be doing in Miazen right now?"

"Not particularly. Just keep in mind that there are evening parties you must attend."

"Evening parties... Why?"

Hatsumi realized the importance of the parade in lifting the citizens' spirits, but she didn't think anything more than that would be necessary. Though she'd posed the question to Selphy, Weitzer was the one to reply.

"It is because I would like us to deepen our friendship."

"Don't we all get along well enough already?"

Hatsumi had known the three of them ever since her first battle. It hadn't been all that long since they'd actually met, but through the bonds of trust and friendship they'd formed on the battlefield, they became like family to one another. She didn't see how they could possibly need something as silly as a party to solidify that.

However...

“My apologies. I spoke poorly there. By ‘us,’ I mean the people of the Saadiah Alliance. I believe that you should properly spend some time with my father and mother, as well as the other leaders from Miazen and the leaders of the other Alliance countries.”

“That’s... I certainly don’t mind meeting with them, but it’s not like we’re in a hurry for that.”

“Actually, Hero-dono, this is a matter of urgent business for the Alliance. If we act right away, then...”

“Are you saying that I should be a dish served to put the Alliance in order?”

“N-No! That is not what I’m—”

“The demons are invading. I don’t think there’s anything more urgent than that.”

She knew what Weitzer was asking her to do was necessary, but she still didn’t like the idea.

“You’re mistaken, Hero-dono! This isn’t about using you for political means...”

Seeing the complex expression on Hatsumi’s face, Weitzer was frantically trying to correct himself, thinking that he had offended her. Meanwhile, Gaius let out his usual dauntless laugh as he turned to Hatsumi.

“It’s about you time you took a hint, innit, Hatsumi?”

“Take a hint? About what?”

“Little Prince Weitzer’s goodwill.”

“His goodwill? It’s true that I feel a bit bad for everything he and the others here are doing for me...”

After being summoned, not just Weitzer, but the entire palace had taken good care of Hatsumi. That was as things should be, considering they were the ones who summoned her, but Hatsumi was still grateful. She made sure to express this, but Gaius let out an astonished sigh.

“How do I put it...? To put it bluntly, you’re amazingly dense. You kinda remind me of that spindly lad I had a meal with a while back...”

Hatsumi had no idea what he was talking about. But after calming down a fair bit, Weitzer collected himself and tried to clarify.

“It is certainly true, Hero-dono, that your help is a considerable boon to the Alliance. That much goes without saying. But I am

thinking ahead—to after we defeat the demons. And I believe this is a necessary part of making a future for you. If you are anxious without your memories, then I will support you for the rest of your life.”

“But... I don’t want to be that much of a burden to you, Weitzer.”

“I-I don’t at all think of you as a burden!”

“But...”

Hatsumi couldn’t just agree to his offer, no matter how kind and generous. She had no intention of weighing him down the rest of his life like that. Besides, she had her own world to return to. Somewhere she knew she had to get back. It was that boy that appeared in her dreams... She felt like she had to see him again no matter what.

“...”

But she couldn’t let those thoughts overtake her. If she thought of nothing but that boy whose face was lost somewhere in the misty haze of her mind, her brain would cease functioning. Sensing the subtleties of her heart from the color of her face, Weitzer looked at her with a worried expression.

“...Hero-dono?”

“Sorry. I think we’re done here, so please leave me be for a while.”

“Hatsumi?”

“Yeah, I’m alright. Thank you, Selphy.”

When Selphy called out to her, Hatsumi smiled back as if to tell her not to worry. After Weitzer apologetically excused himself, all three guests exited the room. Once the door was closed, Hatsumi stood up from her chair and threw herself back onto the bed. She looked idly up at tapestry affixed to the ceiling, and her true feelings escaped her lips in a sigh.

“...I must return to where I came from...”

Her companions were important to her, but she didn’t want to abandon her memories. She wanted to know who she was. Back home—wherever that may be—there might even be someone waiting for her. That’s why...

“And... up we go!”

In the midst of ruminating, Hatsumi heard that casual voice come from her window, which was wide open. Curious, she turned her head to look while still sprawled out on her bed. And there, as

if he'd just climbed up, was a young man squatted in the windowsill.

“Yo!”

“Huh?! What?! Whaaat?!”

The young man—who had black hair and was dressed in green—had appeared out of seemingly nowhere, but casually waved to her in a greeting. Hatsumi bolted right up out of her bed in surprise.

“W-Wait, this is the fourth floor!”

“And? It’s not like you can’t climb up four stories, you know? You use these protrusions as handholds. See? It just takes a little elbow grease and determination. Not that that’s what I did.”

While pantomiming climbing, the young man spoke to her as if nothing about the situation were strange at all. It was true there were a number of ways to climb up to the fourth floor; the real problem was what came before that.

“H-How did you get into the inner grounds of the palace?!”

“All that took was a little something...”

Saying that, the young man pressed his index finger to his thumb. It seemed he meant to suggest it had been a simple affair. After that, he jumped down from the window into the room like it was his prerogative to do so. Just who was he? Ignoring the particulars of his identity for the moment, Hatsumi grabbed her sword, which was leaning up against the wall nearby. She took a stance with it readied at her hip, looking like she was ready to cut him in half at the drop of a hat.

“Don’t move!”

It was a warning. But then, as if the young man hadn’t understood what she was saying, he stiffened up like time had stopped. He stared at her blankly for a while, and then let out a simple, stupefied question.

“...Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me, you trespasser! Should I slay you on the spot?!”

She reissued her warning to the young man looking at her with a rather idiotic look on his face. After freezing up again, he finally seemed to pick up on her seriousness and started panicking.

“Slay? As in... kill me? Come on, you’re not the type to make jokes like that, right?”

“Yes, I’m surprised you know. It’s not a joke.”

“I-It’s not a joke...? Just what the hell are you saying?! Are you

seriously planning to kill me?! For real?! Are you angry 'cause I snuck into a lady's bedroom? I mean, yeah, I did do that, but..."

"Wrong."

"Then what is it?!"

Hatsumi stared daggers into him like she truly did mean to slay him where he stood. She had no idea why he seemed to be so surprised about this. Considering what he was doing, he should have expected this kind of response.

"Do I really have to spell it out for you? Anyone would defend themselves with a stranger sneaking into their room."

"Stranger, you say...?"

"At the very least, I don't recognize you... At all."

After coming to this world, she had not once met this young man. So why was he standing there with a bewildered expression like she'd just told a close friend she didn't know them? She couldn't understand it. The only thing that was clear was that he did indeed seem to be quite shaken.

"D-Don't joke around. This ain't the kind of place for that crap, okay?"

"Didn't I say I wasn't joking? I don't know you."

"There's no way you don't! I'm Suimei! Yakagi Suimei, your childhood friend!"

"Ch-Childhood friend?"

"Yeah. So I'm begging you... Please spare your childhood friend the jokes."

The young man, Yakagi Suimei, let out an agonized groan like he was at his wits' end. She hadn't expected him to introduce himself that way, but his attitude up until now did seem to corroborate it. He was certainly acting as if they were close. But there was one glaring hole in that story.

"Just what are you saying? I'm a hero summoned from another world, you know? There's no way I have childhood friends in this place."

This young man may have had a good reason for infiltrating the palace, but as far as setups and excuses went, this was just too ill-conceived. Nevertheless, when she pointed that out to him, he looked as though she'd stabbed him. He then slowly arched a suspicious eyebrow.

"Hey, what gives? Your memories fly the coop or something?"

"Indeed, it is just as you say. I have amnesia."

“Wait, seriously...?”

The young man now stared at her in complete disbelief.



When Suimei was a young child, one of his father’s good friends was a swordsmanship expert. His father convinced him to move to the area and open up a dojo in the neighborhood. The style of swordsmanship this man practiced was known as the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani. It was an old style that had been passed down since long before even the Warring States period. It originated from its namesake, a dharani—a ritual speech much like a mantra—based on the dragon sword Kurikara wielded by the wrathful Buddhist god Acala, which was used to make demonic spirits and other otherworldly beings capitulate. The sword style inherited that feature. Not only could it be used against humans, it was also effective against spirits, apparitions, and even monsters.

Naturally, that wasn’t the only thing taught in the dojo. The instructor, Kuchiba Kiyoshiro, also taught mundane swordsmanship to the neighborhood children. But behind the scenes, he used his true skills to cut down the monsters running rampant in the world. His daughter, Kuchiba Hatsumi, was following in his footsteps and had also taken up the practice under his tutelage.

With the way things had worked out, Hatsumi didn’t actually know that Suimei was a magician or that he knew about the secret work her family did, but that wasn’t really the issue at the moment. The point was that her skill with a blade was extraordinary. So much so that her father considered it a shame she’d been born a girl. Even with relatively little combat in this world, Suimei could guess that she was probably on par with the Seven Swords. And this girl was standing before him now with her sword raised against him.

“So should I call the guards? Or would you rather be cut down where you stand?”

“Neither, preferably. Both would be a lot of trouble.”

“I find this current situation to be trouble. There’s a strange man in my room, after all.”

“Gimme a break...”

Suimei was floundering. The girl that he’d played with ever since she moved to his neighborhood so many years ago was

claiming not to know who he was. That girl—the very same one he'd learned swordsmanship with—was now lowering her posture in preparation to lash out at him with her blade. The aura he could sense from her told him she wasn't messing around, either. One wrong move right now and he would taste her steel for sure.

But what on earth was he supposed to do about her amnesia? He'd come with the intention of taking her back with him if it was necessary, but he had no idea what the right thing to do in this situation was. As long as she didn't remember him, she wouldn't go with him even if he asked nicely. He had his *magicka*, but that couldn't fix amnesia. There were spells to manipulate the brain and rewrite memories, but if he took that path and forcefully pushed memories into her, there was no doubt that it would put a considerable strain on her mind.

Ultimately, that left him emptyhanded. It was completely vexing. With all his other options a bust, the only thing he could do was try to talk to her until she believed him.

“Hahh...”

Suimei heard Hatsumi exhale. It made him nervous. The blade on her weapon was about 120 centimeters long, and the grip was about another 25. There were some strange ornaments decorating it, but it had the overall shape of a Japanese-style sword, or something imitating one. Within that red scabbard at her hip was undoubtedly a deadly weapon made of a special material from this world.

And right now, Suimei was standing about nine centimeters inside its reach. In other words, she could cut him down from where she stood without taking a single step. No... He knew better than that. Even if her blade hadn't been able reach him, he was still well within her reach.

A sword master who passed a certain threshold in ability was able to strike outside the range of their weapon. It was impossible physically speaking, but to put it simply, with a horizontal slash, they could cut down anything and everything before them like a wall of clouds split by the wind. Such a feat was possible with the sword style this girl used. Her blade was one that defied logic.

“The Kuchiba school of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani. Even with amnesia, you didn't forget your sword style, right?” Suimei asked, wiping away the unpleasant sweat forming on his brow.

“You know of it?” Hatsumi asked in turn, looking surprised.

“Like I said, I *am* your childhood friend...”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Why not?”

“If it were true, why did you come in that way? Couldn’t you have just gone through the front door?”

“Nope. I had to do this precisely because that wasn’t an option.”

“Hmph. Does that mean you have something to hide?”

“Now you’re just splitting hairs...”

Suimei spoke in exasperation. The guards and soldiers were one thing, but he hadn’t expected he’d need to defend himself to his childhood friend.

“Then can you prove it? It certainly looks like you know about my sword style, but it’s possible you figured that out using some kind of spell like the mages and demons. So that alone isn’t proof that you’re my childhood friend.”

“Ugh...”

He couldn’t argue there. He had no other definitive proof capable of convincing her immediately either. He did have a picture he’d taken of her with her family on his phone, but his battery was long since dead. That wouldn’t work. He could still take her with him by force, but it wasn’t like that would bring her memories back. There would also be a huge commotion if the hero were abducted.

While Suimei was racking his brain trying to come up with an alternative solution, he heard violent footsteps racing down the hall outside. Someone had sensed something. Before Suimei could even use his magicka, a woman’s voice was coming from other side of the door.

“Hatsumi?! Is something wrong?!” the stranger called.

“Ah, Selphy! It’s an intruder!” Hatsumi shouted back.

“Are you talking about me?!” Suimei demanded.

“Who else?!” she roared.

And with those words came a flash of her blade. Suimei jumped back towards the window to dodge it. The tip of her long blade then changed its trajectory at a right angle, and her slash became a thrust. The blade, made from corroded silver, sliced through the air with a sharp whistling sound. The tip of it was reaching out for Suimei’s stomach. He just barely managed to dodge it and escape deeper into the room.

“Are you trying to kill me?!”

“Just skewer you a bit. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to avoid your vitals.”

“Don’t tell me not to worry, damn it! That’s still freakin’ dangerous!”

Immediately following their brief exchange, the door opened with a bang. The person who came in, presumably the woman who’d called out to Hatsumi a minute ago, was dressed in a green robe. Suimei recognized her as the mage who was standing atop one of the festival floats during the parade.

“Hatsumi! Are you safe?”

“Yes, we’ve just got an intruder on our hands... But you’re outnumbered now, you see. Just give up already.”

“Indeed. I don’t know who you are or how you infiltrated the palace, but there’s no escape for you now.”

It was true. The mage woman had the door covered, and the window was now well within the range of Hatsumi’s blade. Even where he was standing was dangerous. Hatsumi could probably hit anywhere in the room with her skills. Which meant...

“If there’s no way to escape, then I just have to make one!”

Gathering mana in his fist, Suimei lashed out at the wall and invoked his magicka. His fist let out a powerful shockwave as he thrust it forward, a ripple of etheric. And when his fist met the wall, a section of it was blown outward and reduced to rubble.

Suimei could hear cursing and groaning behind him. The two women had likely been forced to give their undivided attention to protecting themselves from the shockwave. Using that opportunity, Suimei threw himself through the hole in the wall he’d created. The building was four stories tall, and they were on the fourth floor right now. But to a magician, such a meager height was nothing to be concerned about. A fall like that was but a trifle.

In the dead of the night, Suimei could hear the sound of the wind rushing up to meet him as the ground drew imminently nearer. Suimei landed safely with his magicka and began to take off... but for some reason, he could hear the voice of the woman Hatsumi had called Selphy ringing in his ear.

“An intruder has appeared in the palace—a young man with black hair wearing green clothing. After breaking into the hero’s room, he’s now trying to escape through the courtyard. All guards are to report there. I repeat...”

It was a simple alarm. The robed woman was a mage, and seemed to specialize in wind magic. The wind was carrying her voice to every nook and cranny of the palace. And thanks to that, Suimei could immediately hear footsteps coming his way. He ran over to the edge of the courtyard, but there were suddenly soldiers swarming from every direction.

“I found him! Over there!”

“Spread out and surround him! We cannot let a ruffian who snuck into the palace escape!”

“Tch... They sure came out in force.”

He must have picked a bad place to land. There was nowhere to hide in the courtyard, and there was quite some distance between him and the next building. After being surrounded by the soldiers, Suimei heard a familiar voice from the back of the group.

“Huh? Aren’t you that spindly lad from the other day?!”

The surprised man addressing him was the jovial man he’d met at the restaurant back in Grafille, Gaius Forvan. With his back pressed up against the courtyard wall, Suimei replied in a lighthearted tone as if nothing were wrong.

“Aah, we meet again, geezer. Long time no see.”

“It hasn’t been that long and I ain’t no geezer, damn it! What’s going on here, lad? Are you the intruder?”

“It’s complicated. Like, I’m in this deeper than the Mariana Trench complicated.”

“You playing dumb? I’ll give you a whooping if you are, you know?”

“By the looks of it, I think someone else is probably gonna cut me down before you get that far.”

Suimei could see the surrounding soldiers’ eyes glinting just like their drawn swords. They all seemed to be quite offended that he infiltrated not just the palace, but the hero’s room. Before long, one more person arrived. The crowd of soldiers parted, and another one of Hatsumi’s companions emerged. If Suimei remembered right from the parade, he was Miazen’s prince, Weitzer Ryerzen.

“Gaius, do you know this man?” he asked, a calm and composed air about him.

“Not well. He’s just some lad I shared a table with at a restaurant,” Gaius responded nonchalantly.

“I see.”

After confirming that much, Weitzer drew his sword and turned

his attention to Suimei.

“Not only did you perform the foolish act of trespassing in Calnus Palace, scoundrel, you dared to set foot in the hero’s bedroom. You understand what will happen to you, correct?”

Suimei met Weitzer’s quiet, yet overpowering voice with a grand sigh.

“Just so you know, I only came here to see an old friend of mine.”

“A friend, you say?”

“I mean Hatsumi. Though it seems she doesn’t recognize me at all thanks to the whole amnesia thing...”

“...”

“What nonsense. The hero was summoned from another world. She has no ‘old friends’ here.”

Gaius knit his brow and looked at Suimei curiously while Weitzer boldly declared Suimei a liar. Seeing their reactions, Suimei hung his head in defeat.

“Well, the prince is right, ain’t he?”

The sound of Gaius cracking his knuckles reverberated through the air.

“Well, whatever the case, seems like we got a whole lotta questions for you, lad. Just be a good boy and be obedient for now.”

“This isn’t really the kind of situation where you guys are going to go easy on me just because I behave myself now...”

“Naturally. There’s no need to show an intruder like you mercy. Just be grateful that we didn’t dice you to pieces on sight.”

Gaius was speaking to Suimei in a rather friendly fashion, but Weitzer’s tone was as sharp as his blade. The other soldiers still looked ready for a fight, too. To escape, Suimei would have to get past them, as well as Gaius and Weitzer.

“You guys aren’t gonna give me a choice about this, are you...?”

Suimei lamented the situation with a long, fraught sigh. And then, in spite of the courtyard being in direct moonlight, his figure sank into the shadows.



Meanwhile, the guild master of the Twilight Pavilion’s Miazen branch, Rumeya, was also at the palace. Hearing that Suimei was

planning on infiltrating to make contact with the Alliance's hero, she thought she'd take the opportunity to do a little snooping herself.

Of course, her reason for doing so could be summed up simply with "it sounded like fun." She had her position to consider, but being a therianthrope, she was something of a pleasure-seeker by nature. She just couldn't resist the idea of adventure when it came knocking. Normally, due to her fox ears and seven tails, she stood out quite a bit. But right now, she was impersonating a palace guard with the transformation techniques passed down by the golden fox clan.

She'd lost sight of Suimei in a corridor not too long after entering the palace, but she'd just now heard a voice on the wind proclaiming the presence of an intruder. As the message echoed through the palace grounds, guards carrying lamps began rushing towards the courtyard with a flurry of angry shouting.

"...Good grief, did that boy blow it?"

Rumeya grimaced. Suimei used magic from another world and seemed to possess a considerable amount of power, so she'd thought she had nothing to worry about. Apparently that was careless to assume.

This'll get ugly if I don't go to save him...

Lefille had told Rumeya all about Suimei's true strength. It was impressive, but so were the palace guards. There were also the hero's companions around. Even being a mage from another world, Suimei would likely end up caught. But since he was Lefille's benefactor, Rumeya couldn't just abandon him. She let out a sigh like she considered this all quite troublesome, and began heading for the courtyard herself when she suddenly noticed something strange.

"...?"

It had suddenly gotten darker. She reflexively looked up overhead as a few clouds began to float by in front of the moon. Perhaps they were the cause... Or at least part of it. The moon still wasn't completely covered, so Rumeya didn't think that was the only factor at play.

But Rumeya knew she didn't have time to stand around contemplating the odd darkness, so she shook off such thoughts and continued towards the courtyard. Suimei was there, surrounded by Gaius Forvan, Weitzer Ryerzen, and a mob of palace guards. All the

actors were in place. Suimei had his back up against a wall, and it seemed the play was just about to reach its climax.

“Goodness me... Isn’t this just the worst case scenario?”

After slipping into the mob and blending in with the guards, she grimaced at the scene unfolding in front of her. Things would have been better if Suimei were on the run, but cornered like so, she didn’t think he’d be walking away from this unharmed. More guards were still steadily gathering, and they had now formed an impenetrable semi-circle around Suimei.

Escaping would no longer be a simple matter. That mysterious mage from the self-governed state—the one they called the Snowstorm—was probably also around here somewhere too. Would she burst onto the scene while the guards tried to capture Suimei? No. Contrary to all of Rumeiya’s expectations, this wasn’t the end of the play, but the start of the second act.

The palace guards charged in to detain Suimei, but he only shrugged his shoulders at their approach. Just then, something caused the mana lamps installed in the courtyard as well as the lamps being held by the guards to start flickering.

They were flashing in and out at random intervals, and eventually, as if they’d all given up the ghost, light vanished from the courtyard completely. In the brief instant where the guards were bewildered by this unexpected turn of events, the very air around Suimei seemed to waver. It was like he was covered in a heat haze. Suimei himself wasn’t moving. His bangs obscured his face, and Rumeiya could see nothing of his expression. But despite the predicament he was in, he stood stock-still and did nothing.

However, the moment she did finally manage to get a good look at Suimei through that transparent haze, a shiver ran through her body. It didn’t feel like the malice that came from demons, but right now, Suimei was giving off a strangely eerie feeling. It felt like she was staring dread right in the eyes. Like the darkness around her was thick enough to be tangible.

And then, without warning, all the guards who were moving in on Suimei fell to the ground with a clang.

“Wha—?!”

Witnessing them all collapse with no logical explanation, she couldn’t help gasping. The other guards and the hero’s companions did the same. Alarmed, they all began stirring in the darkness. During this confusion, even the palace guards further in the back

began to fall over as they lost consciousness.

The only ones left standing were Gaius, Weitzer, and a select handful of the palace guard. The hero's companions appeared unfazed, but even the hardier guards were spooked. Rumeya thought she could all see them sweating profusely. Gaius, after carefully looking around at the fallen men, turned to Suimei.

"...The hell did you just do?"

"As you can see, I knocked them out."

"You... knocked them out?"

Gaius seemed completely bewildered at Suimei's brief reply. Weitzer, on the other hand, had much more to say.

"Without magic? Without even touching them? How suspect, indeed! What the hell did you do, bastard?!"

"I'd just be repeating myself at this point."

"Do you intend to deceive me with those words? Impossible! Are you suggesting you knocked them out just by thinking it? Well, you bastard?"

"Correct. The very 'impossibility' you speak of."

As his statement hung in the air without any pretense, Weitzer replied in a somewhat disgusted tone.

"Enough with your nonsense. You cannot knock people out just by thinking about it. How absurd. Besides, the soldiers here are the Alliance's elite, I'll have you know. They are both physically and mentally strong. They would never fall from just—"

Suimei's red eyes pointed an extremely bored, cold gaze at Weitzer and interrupted him.

"What're you saying? These are just normal men who know a thing or two about using swords, right? What makes you think guys like that stood a chance against my will?"

Right after he fired off those words, Rumeya felt like the air in the area cooled down considerably. Had he done something? Or was she just imagining it after hearing his chilling words? No, something more than the cold night breeze was blowing through. It felt like it stuck to her, prickling at her skin.

Intimidated by Suimei's auspicious speech and eerie aura, most of the remaining guards ran away. But it was already too late. They all collapsed to the ground as they tried to flee. From what Rumeya could see, it didn't seem like their spirits had been drained or anything. There was certainly a bizarre atmosphere cloaking the area, but it didn't seem to be what was knocking out the robust

palace guards either. Was it really just as he said? That they were falling simply because he willed it?

“You bastard...” Weitzer practically hissed.

“The rest of you who are left, get out of the way. A simple human has no way of winning against a magician, you know?”

As Suimei made his exasperated declaration, Weitzer seemed to realize something. A confident smirk crossed his lips.

“But it seems your powers have no effect on us.”

“Sure enough. We’re still standing, ain’t we?”

Even Gaius wore a fearless smile as he backed up his companion. It was true that they were the cornerstone of their side in this battle where their subordinates were dropping like flies. So why was it that they were unable to sense the danger before them? Rumeya couldn’t figure it out. If she were in their position, between the ominous happenings in their surroundings Suimei’s own eerie aura, she would tuck her tails and run away immediately. The tides were already in Suimei’s favor, and it didn’t seem like anything they could do would change that now.

For in the dim moonlight, Suimei’s figure fell into darkness. It was as if he was a natural denizen of shadow. Night itself clung to him, cloaking his figure.

“Weitzer! Gaius!”

Suddenly, a woman’s voice rang out from behind Rumeya. It was gentle, and carried with it great concern for her friends. It was a beautiful, dulcet voice, and a woman with an equally beautiful appearance arrived in short order. She had long, flowing hair and strong-willed green eyes. And above all else, she wielded a terrifying sword. This was the hero of the Alliance.

“Hatsumi?!” exclaimed Gaius.

“Hero-dono!” shouted Weitzer.

“This is... Huh?”

As Hatsumi went running towards her companions, she caught sight of the terrible spectacle that lay before her. After observing the bodies on the ground in utter bafflement, she looked sternly at Suimei.

“Did you do this?”

“Yeah, but there’s no need to worry. They’re only unconscious. There’s nothing wrong with them other than that.”

A dangerous tension seemed to be building up between the two of them. Based on Suimei’s story, they were supposed to be

childhood friends, but judging from Hatsumi's attitude, that didn't seem to be the case at all. Had something happened?

Following shortly after Hatsumi, the mage from the self-governed state, Selphy Fittney, also arrived on the scene.

"With this, all four of us have gathered!" she called.

Indeed, all of the hero's companions now rallied to her side. Meanwhile, Suimei was still quietly trying to get through to Hatsumi.

"Hatsumi, I want you to listen to me."

"If you obediently turn yourself in, I'll consider listening to you."

"I'm not into that kinda stuff..."

He knew he couldn't comply with what Hatsumi was asking. It likely wouldn't work out well for him. After all, there was no way the royal family of Miazen would treat him courteously after all this commotion. A bit stumped as to how to handle this increasingly complicated situation, Suimei looked imploringly at Hatsumi. Seeing this, Gaius turned to her as well.

"He's been sayin' it for a while, but is he really an acquaintance of yours?"

"I don't know him, but he claims to be my childhood friend."

"Wuh?"

Gaius raised a questioning voice in a near comical fashion. He then turned his astonished gaze on Suimei.

"Hey, lad. If you're gonna lie, at least try a little harder, will ya? No matter how much you wanna meet the hero, not even some little brat would use that kinda excuse, y'know?"

"Sure, but your outright dismissal of what I'm trying to tell you is the real problem here. Hatsumi has amnesia, right? So not any single one of you can know for sure that what I'm saying is a lie. You follow?"

"Oh, come on. Claimin' to be the childhood friend of a summoned hero is just li'l farfetched, doncha think?"

Gaius didn't hesitate in making his position on the matter clear, but Suimei pushed no further. Rather than objecting, he simply let out a heavy sigh. It felt like he was talking to immovable statues. It was Selphy who questioned him next.

"So, what will you do now? Will you obediently turn yourself in?"

"I already refused that, didn't I?"

“Shall I interpret that as intent to resist?”

“...”

Receiving no reply, Selphy tried a different approach. Something a little more threatening.

“Then let me ask you this: do you really think that you can win against us? You do know the four of us broke the demon army and defeated a demon general, don’t you?”

“That’s why you think you’re strong? That’s a bit conceited, isn’t it?”

“Care to test us then, lad?” said Gaius, jumping in.

Despite his joking tone, this was no joking matter. If Suimei resisted, this would turn into a serious fight. But, contrary to all expectations, Suimei merely turned around.

“Uh...”

“No thanks. I’m not interested. I’ll be going for now.”

“Huh?! Wait, you’re gonna run away after all that talk?!”

“I’m not interested in needlessly causing a mess. I’ll come again, so do excuse me for tonight.”

Suimei looked back over his shoulder and spoke politely. He couldn’t do what they were asking, but this would be his own way of quietly backing down. Perhaps because his childhood friend was present, he didn’t want to resort to violence. But Gaius quickly sprang into action.

“You think I’m gonna just say ‘yeah, okay’ now?!”

Unleashing his fighting spirit, Gaius leaped forward with a magnificent punch. His feet gouged the earth below as he kicked off the ground, and his fist flew out in front of him with a tremendous amount of power that shook the very air around it. If a blow like that caught Suimei, his dainty body would be in for a world of hurt. But Gaius’s attack was reckless.

“Hmph. Compared to my father, your fists are far too slow.”

With a snort and an exasperated comment, Suimei took a step towards Gaius in one swift, fluid motion. His right foot—the one he’d stepped forward with—dug into the ground with more power than when Gaius had launched himself. The ground practically shattered underneath him. He then lowered his waist and ejected his fist upward. A loud noise resonated through Gaius’s abdomen. The impact reverberated through him to the earth below, kicking up dirt. Rumeya felt like she could see a green magic circle coiling around Suimei’s extended right arm and hand. But even more

stunned than she was... was Gaius himself.

“What... the...”

He couldn't even begin to believe that a mage might beat him at his own game. Roaring over his surprised gasping, Suimei let out a shout that filled the courtyard.

“HAH!”

Putting the martial arts instructor to shame, Suimei drove his fist further into Gaius's abdominal muscles. Even the air trembled with a shockwave from the blow, and Gaius's body was blown clear across the courtyard, smashing into the wall on the opposite side. There was the unmistakable sound of the collision, followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

“Ridiculous...”

“You're kidding! Gaius!”

Selphy and Hatsumi's disbelieving cries rang out across the courtyard. Though he didn't raise his voice, Prince Weitzer was also staring on in shock. Other than that, all was still. The only signs left of the encounter were the fractured earth that made it look as though there had been an explosion, the remnants of Suimei's mana lingering in the air, and the silhouette of his fist extended outward. Rumeya could hear him exhale profoundly, but like before, his face was too concealed by his bangs for her to clearly see his expression. She could only guess it was calm. Before long, he stood back up and addressed his opponent.

“Yo, geezer. You alive over there?”

“You... ain't really... a mage... are you?”

“I'm a magician. It was just a mistake to think I couldn't engage in close combat.”

Suimei stood his ground fearlessly, but it became clear he had no intention of going any further than necessary. After his short exchange with Gaius, everyone else seemed to regain their composure. The mage from the self-governed state, Selphy, then began to move.

“Selphy!” Hatsumi called after her.

“Hatsumi, please step back. I will corner this man with offensive magic.”

“What? But...”

“Hero-dono, this way,” offered Weitzer.

It seemed Selphy was worried Hatsumi would get caught in the crossfire. But she stood there dumbfounded when she heard Selphy

say she intended to use offensive magic. That was where Weitzer stepped in and escorted her to the rear line. The mage known as Snowstorm, Selphy Fittney, then stepped forward brimming with mana.

“Like I’ve been saying...”

“And after all this, do you really think you’ll get off so easily?”

“Hahh... But you guys started it, didn’t you?”

Suimei couldn’t help sighing. But he didn’t move. Even though Selphy was steadily approaching, he only sluggishly turned to face her. He wasn’t gathering his mana, chanting a spell, fleeing, or even preparing his defenses. On the other hand, Selphy pointed her large staff directly at him.

“Oh Wind! Thou art the power of eternity. Become a circle...”

As she began to chant, the jewel installed at the tip of her darkwood staff began to shine.

“The turbulent tyrant, right?” remarked Suimei. “Hmm? Seems the scale is quite large too.”

Just from the opening of the chant, it seemed he had grasped not only the spell, but also its magnitude. He sighed a little, a bit impressed, but still didn’t move. Was he just slow? Or... perhaps he just felt he had no reason to hurry?

“The circle of tyranny. The uncountable destruction born from the air, rush towards my enemy with your righteousness. Loud Tyrant!”

Once Selphy uttered the keywords, vortices of wind spiraled up from nothingness with her at their center. They raged and swirled in place, unmoving aside from their spinning. There were ten... no, twenty of them. Their numbers continued to grow, and then all at once, they rushed towards Suimei with a roar.

But at that moment, he began to mumble something and held up his hand. Several red lights shot out in front of him like strings. Bending at right angles, the lights turned here and there, piercing through the whirlwinds at frightening speed. By the time they were closing in on Selphy, the whirlwinds had died down so dramatically that there was hardly a breeze in the air.

“Wha—Ugh!”

Selphy’s surprise was interrupted by a gasp of anguish. It seemed the pain she was suddenly in far overrode the astonishment of seeing her spell negated. Seeing this, Suimei spoke up.

“You should be a little more wary of having your spells turned.

If you don't have proper countermeasures in place, this is what happens."

"Wh-What... did you do?!"

"I simply unraveled the spell. I've seen it before, I have to say. So the reason you're in pain right now is because, before you could fully manifest the spell, I forcefully cancelled it."

As he spoke, Suimei raised his right arm over his head. With that, the loose pieces of earth he'd shattered in defeating Gaius suddenly rocketed into the sky. And it didn't stop there; anything that was lying around on the ground was sucked upward as well. Quite a large quantity of debris gathered in the air that was now coiling into a whirlwind. Once it was fully formed, it hurled the odds and ends it had collected at Selphy with a vengeance.

"Urgh... Oh Wind. Thou shalt become a firm shield to protect me. Repel everything with your raging winds. Vortex Blockade."

Selphy calmly chanted a defensive spell. Wind from all directions formed a vortex before her, which repelled and scattered the incoming debris.

"You cast magic without chanting?!" she gasped.

"That just now? You could barely call that magic... I mean, all I did was lift up some dirt. You could do the same thing with a bulldozer or a power shovel."

Rumeya couldn't understand the last few words he used, but she could tell from his tone that he was implying what he'd done was nothing special. The fighting had come to a halt for the moment, yet Suimei still didn't move from where he stood. He'd already defeated Gaius. And Rumeya had heard that when he got serious, he could unleash a string of attacks one after the other. But perhaps he simply wasn't interested or engaged right now. He merely stood there waiting. Selphy, on the other hand, seemed to have no intention of giving up.

"You leave me no choice. It's time to get serious."

"Listen. If you take this further, then it'll only cause more trouble for— Okay, she's not even listening."

"Oh Wind. Thou art the evil gale that carries the kiss of the frozen glacier. Blow violently, grow strong, and trap my enemy within your superb cage. No one and nothing escapes your icy prison, a baptism of the snowstorm. Ephemeral Razing!"

This was the spell that had earned her the title "Snowstorm." When she used it, a hostile storm of snow and ice took the form of a

whirling gyre. As it swirled around Suimei, he stood there like it was perfectly natural. It then closed in on him, forming a massive prison of ice, snow, and wind. All that was visible within it was a blanket of pure white.

“It’s over,” Selphy declared coldly.

“Wait, Selphy! This is going too far!”

“There is nothing to worry about, Hatsumi. I held back enough that he shouldn’t die.”

“B-But...”

“When the snowstorm clears, he will just be incapacitated. All that’s left is to capture him.”

Selphy had declared that this was the end. Rumeya even saw for herself that Suimei was engulfed in Selphy’s blizzard, but... what was this cold sweat still running down her back? And answering her doubts, a faint voice came from the heart of the malevolent storm.

“O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamore...”

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician’s resentment...]

“?!”

“No way! He shouldn’t even be able to move his mouth in those temperatures!”

Hatsumi turned and stared at the icy prison in surprise while Selphy let out a confounded shout, but the chanting didn’t stop there.

“Parito colluctatione et aestuato. Deferto impedimentum fatum atrox.”

[Give form to death’s agony and burst into flames. Bestow the one who obstructs me with a dreadful destiny.]

Multiple red magic circles began forming in the air around the prison. In the center of them all was a particularly large one that seemed to be hovering right over where Suimei should be standing. Before long, Rumeya could spot a silhouette deep within the snowstorm. It was faint, but within its grasp was a bright flame.

“Conluceto. O Ashurbanipalis fulgidus lapillus.”

[Shine. Oh Ashurbanipal’s dazzling gem.]

The next thing anyone knew, there was an explosion. Flames burst out of the smaller magic circles, and a large, bright red pillar of flame erupted from the bigger magic circle that was now revolving at high speed. The moment the smaller fires met the larger one, they reacted to each other and detonated into a massive conflagration that blew away the white snowstorm and dyed the

night sky scarlet in its stead.

The wave of heat that surged forth in the aftermath swamped all who were present, including the hero, her companions, and Rumeiya. But the man who'd authored it was restraining it. The fierce wind and inferno that should have accompanied the explosion decayed into nothing more than a warm breeze by his hand.

As the crimson mist cleared away, standing there as if nothing happened... was none other than Suimei. The ground at his feet was bubbling like it was boiling. It looked as though he was standing atop a sea of molten iron. And the very sight of him, completely unfazed despite being at the epicenter of an explosion that the very earth had been unable to endure without melting, could only be described as terrifying.

“Ugh...!”

Selphy let out an unpleasant groan as she realized the magic that was her life's work had been blown away with but a single spell. In response, Suimei addressed her in what sounded like an admiring tone.

“You're called Selphy, right? You're a pretty capable mage, aren't you? The mana loaded into that spell was impressive, and its destructive power was considerable. It even restrains your target and prevents them from chanting. Out of all the mages I've met here so far, you're really something.”

“...Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“It's a matter of perspective. You're nothing compared to Menia as she is now or that dangerous princess from the Empire. You've still got a long way to go before you catch up to us...”

As Suimei uttered those last few words, he already seemed to be playing his next hand. The next thing anyone knew, the bodies of the fallen guards were stirring... but not on their own.

“Wha—”

Before Selphy could even question what was going on, the bodies of the guards were lifted up into the air and hurled at her. But these were all men she knew—her allies. That dulled her judgment. The few extra seconds she spent trying to decide how to stave off her unconscious allies proved to be fatal.

Choosing to evade instead of using magic, all she could do was throw herself to the ground. She dove to the side in an attempt to roll away. She dodged one body, then a second. Her actions weren't

particularly graceful or dexterous, but she was still able to outmaneuver the slow-moving bodies.

“Did you think such an attack would be able to defeat—”

“Nah, not at all. But this isn’t an attack.”

“What...?”

After continual dodging, Selphy made it all the way to Suimei’s right flank. But little did she realize she was now exactly where he wanted her. Suimei thrust out his right hand in her direction, his thumb and middle finger pressed together. It was like he’d guided her there, expected her to be there—he didn’t even have to look. And then, just like that, a snap rang out in the nighttime courtyard. With it, the air in front of Selphy’s eyes exploded. Perhaps from the concussive force of it, she immediately collapsed on the spot, seemingly unconscious.

“Selphy...”

Seeing her trusted companion utterly defeated, Hatsumi gasped. She was seized by the surprise for a brief moment, but then turned a sharp gaze on Suimei and stepped forward. Seeing her raise her sword against him, the cold expression Suimei had been wearing suddenly turned bitter.

“I said that I don’t want to fight you.”

As if weighed down by a difficult problem, Suimei put his hand to his brow and grimaced. With no empathy for his desire to protect a childhood friend, Hatsumi spoke to him in a challenging, angry tone.

“Did you think I’d stay quiet after my companions were defeated?”

“That just now? That was self-defense. They were the ones that came after me, and they weren’t playing around. I was just trying to leave, you know?”

“That’s... But...”

She seemed to understand where he was coming from. Perhaps she did have a little bit of sympathy for him, but that was overruled by her indignation for her fallen companions, and she once more turned a critical eye on him. Suimei couldn’t stand it anymore. His troubled expression turned stern, like he was rebuking an unreasonable child.

“So what? You’re gonna kill me? That sword you’re wielding right now doesn’t have a hint of righteousness in it and you know it. If Instructor Kiyoshiro saw you wielding a sword in direct

opposition to the Kuchiba School's teachings, you'd be punished immediately, you know?"

"What...? But I..."

"Are you going to use amnesia as an excuse? Stop it. The Hatsumi I know isn't that kind of girl."

Was she overwhelmed by Suimei, or was it that part of her realized he was right? Hatsumi's face distorted like she was in pain. At some point, she even relaxed her fighting stance. When she did, Weitzer stepped between her and Suimei.

"Silence, you. A mere intruder has no right to instigate Hero-dono."

"If the third wheel would kindly stay out of this..."

Suimei's strict attitude crumbled slightly as he sighed in exasperation, but not a moment later, he turned a sharp gaze on the prince of Miazen. Anyone could tell by looking that things were about to get prickly again. If there were ever a time to get out, this seemed like it. Judging that it was the perfect opportunity, Rumeya leaped out from the group of remaining guards.

"Coming through!"

"Who— Ugh!"

She ran in in a flash, swinging her sword to keep Weitzer at bay. As she expected, he moved back accordingly, and Rumeya then took up a position at Suimei's side like she too stood in opposition to the hero and the others.

"You're no palace guard! Are you that bastard's companion?!" Weitzer demanded angrily.

"Gee, I wonder."

"What?!"

Rumeya shrugged her shoulders as she teased Weitzer. She then turned her attention to Suimei.

"Hey... Huh?"

He looked back at her in bewilderment, apparently realizing her true identity. He looked as though he intended to ask what on earth she was doing in the courtyard, but she cut straight to the matter at hand.

"Step aside, Suimei. I'll buy you five seconds and not a moment longer. While I hold them back, you get up on the roof and then pull me up. You can do that, right?"

"...Got it."

As Suimei nodded, Weitzer lunged towards them. It seemed he

intended to give them no quarter.

“You think I’ll let you get away with that?!”

With an angry roar, he skillfully lashed out with his sword. It seemed he was quite worthy of his title as one of the Seven Swords... yet there was something strange about his attack. He only wielded one sword, but after a moment, the lines drawn in the air by his blade multiplied as it closed in. Vertical, horizontal, and diagonal slashes poured in from all directions. A normal swordsman wouldn’t even have time to kiss their shoulders goodbye before their head was separated from their torso, but Rumeya was no ordinary opponent. Not only did she have forty years on Weitzer, she was also one of the Seven Swords.

“My, what an aggressive attack... Hup! Not so fast! Hyah!”

With lighthearted battle cries like she was having fun, Rumeya carefully parried each of his strikes. And then, intending to pay him back with exact change, she returned the same number of blows.

“Ugh! Such an underhanded sword style!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment coming from the man they call the Cloud of Death. But now it’s my turn... HAAAAAH!”

Unleashing her fighting spirit, the aura about Rumeya changed. She’d been handling her sword with a great deal of finesse, but she now used her physical prowess as a therianthrope to launch a single, straightforward attack. Not even the man known as the Cloud of Death was able to parry such a powerful, direct blow, but he had to try. His sword drew a blue arc in the air and landed exactly where Rumeya pictured it would in her mind.

“Ridiculous... Bastard, just who are you?”

Weitzer couldn’t conceal his surprise at having his sword flicked away by a mere soldier. Unable to believe what he’d just seen with his own eyes, he looked between his sword—which had been flung some distance away—and Rumeya in disbelief. But then a voice came from above. Looking up, he could see Suimei’s silhouette on the roof backlit by the moon.

“I’m pulling you up now.”

“I’m in your hands—literally.”

After giving a casual reply, Rumeya’s body began floating upward. It was like an invisible rope was pulling her towards the roof.

“Wait!” Weitzer shouted after her.

Rumeya simply pretended not to hear him, and climbed up onto

the roof when she made it. She and Suimei quickly made to leave, but Suimei stopped and looked back down at Hatsumi in the courtyard.

“Hatsumi, I will come back. But don’t try to kill next time, okay?”

“I...”

“See ya.”

After giving his somewhat concerned farewell, Suimei jumped to the next rooftop over. Rumea followed swiftly after. As the two of them were running along the sloped roof, Suimei glanced over at Rumea.

“Rumea-san, you have my gratitude for your assistance... But what are you doing here?”

“Nothing much. I heard you were going to infiltrate the palace. It sounded amusing, so I came to watch.”

“...Are you making fun of me?”

“Think of it as babysitting. It wouldn’t sound good to just call it spectating.”

“But... didn’t you just admit that’s what you were doing?”

Suimei grimaced and sighed in astonishment. He couldn’t help it. This was just a drop in the bucket of ridiculousness that had been dumped on him over the years. And Rumea had caught a glimpse of that tonight.

“Honestly, I thought you’d screwed things up... But to think it was amnesia...”

“Yeah, I was careless. Not even I expected this.”

“So, what will you do from here? Finding out she doesn’t have her memories doesn’t give you the answer you wanted, does it? I’d imagine that would only make you more worried.”

“Yeah. But really, the same as before, the only thing I can do is talk to her. There’s something else that I’m curious about, though. I’m thinking of investigating that before coming back here.”

“I don’t think you’ll find it so easy to get in again...”

Rumea was issuing him a friendly warning, but Suimei seemed to think nothing of it.

“Probably not. But none of them seem capable of handling a magician, either. If all they do is increase the guard, then infiltrating again won’t be but so difficult.”

“My, what confidence... Well, after seeing how you fight, I don’t really have any argument.”

"It's not like I can really fail at sneaking in here when they don't have a single trap in place," he said, trying to suggest it wasn't really a matter of pride. He then quietly added, "My father's probably rolling in his grave..."

Before exiting the castle grounds, Suimei turned back towards the courtyard one last time with a longing, regretful look on his face.

"She's still on your mind, is she? Is she really just a friend of yours?"

"Is that weird?"

"Well, it's not like I don't understand a good friendship. But she seems to be a little more important to you than that. And if she's not your special someone, then I have to admit I'm a bit curious as to what she really is to you."

Hearing that she was simply curious, Suimei made a complex expression and decided to explain.

"Hatsumi... is my cousin."

"So she's family? I see... Well in that case, it's normal to worry, huh?"

"Yeah..."

Rumeya watched Suimei. Seeing his downcast expression, he didn't at all appear to be the young, energetic boy he was when he first visited her office. No, there was a shadow behind those sorrowful eyes now. To her, He looked more like an old soldier who'd lost his hometown. And she wasn't too far off the mark; Suimei was indeed staring down the possibility of never returning home again. But she shook off such dark thoughts and called out to him once more.

"Hey."

"Yeah?"

"Aren't you... living a bit too recklessly?"

Hearing her words, Suimei came to a stop and turned to look at her directly.

"Not so much so that it's a problem. If there's really something I want to protect, don't I have to take a few risks here and there?"

"I... suppose you're right. That was foolish for me of all people to ask, wasn't it?"

As she laughed it off, Suimei leaped forward into the darkness.



The young man who had intruded in Hatsumi's room went on to defeat a large number of soldiers, Gaius, and Selphy. Then an accomplice arrived to aid him, and the two of them vanished from the palace grounds into the dark of night.

There was nothing Hatsumi herself could really do after the fact, so she returned to her bedroom alone. From her window, she could see the courtyard below, illuminated by sconces and mana lamps. Palace guards and government officials were restlessly milling about on high alert. The night's events were unheard of; never before had half the entire palace guard been incapacitated by a single intruder. And said intruder still managed to get away. The entire castle was in chaos in the aftermath. Hatsumi could hear all kinds of angry shouting and barking from her window. Nearly the entire guard would have to be called in to make up for the unconscious men, and there was still the matter of pursuing the intruder. It would be a long night for anyone who worked in the castle.

After the intruder's escape, Gaius and Selphy quickly regained consciousness and received magical treatment. They seemed to be fine; the only real damage done had been to their pride. The moment he was back on his feet, Gaius ran off shouting about going to train—despite it being the middle of the night. As for Selphy, after suffering such a humiliating defeat, it seemed her self-confidence had been seriously shaken. She spent quite some time brooding that night.

As for Weitzer, who had escaped the encounter with Suimei unscathed, he went to report to the king of Miazen on what had happened. The king was famous for being a gentle man, but as one would expect, an event like this rattled even him. He severely reprimanded those in charge of palace security, and gave a strict order for defenses to be fortified.

An hour had now elapsed since the intruder had escaped, but there was still not a single report of him being found. No one, however, was all that surprised. For someone who infiltrated the well-guarded palace and handily defeated both Gaius and Selphy, lying low would be nothing. It was unlikely the guards would ever find him, and even if they did, capturing him would be nigh impossible.

Based on what Hatsumi had heard from Weitzer, the young man had toppled the palace guards without even moving. It was

hardly a fight. But...

“A person from the same world...”

That was what stuck out to her the most. The young man who'd come into her room claimed that they were childhood friends. That inevitably meant they had to be from the same world. He very well may be someone from her past, someone who was part of those precious memories that were lost to her. But she couldn't tell for sure. She had her doubts, certainly, but he knew her name and her sword style. He even seemed to know her father. And most of all, he'd looked at her with such wistful, nostalgic, and sincere eyes. But still, what if it were all just an act?

“...”

Hatsumi threw herself backwards onto her bed. Honestly speaking, she couldn't even remember being summoned very well. When she came to, she was lying on the same bed she was now. All she knew was that she was somewhere unfamiliar. As she lay there in a daze, the door to the room opened. That was when she met Selphy, who immediately explained things. Apparently Selphy was the one who'd summoned her... from a different world.

But even after listening to what Selphy said, the fog inside Hatsumi's mind wouldn't clear. Just who was she? What kind of person was she? Unable to answer even those simple questions about herself, she was at a complete loss. The only thing that she managed to remember was her own name. And with only that to cling to, she broke. Weitzer was also present with Selphy at the time, but she mostly remembered Selphy's calm, concerned face.

After that, things were dull for a time. Once she learned she couldn't return home, aside from the meals she ate with the royal family or the walks she took with Selphy, she mostly stayed confined to her room. But then one day, news of the demons invading reached the palace.

Looking up at the ceiling, Hatsumi recalled that day clearly.

On that morning, Weitzer visited her room. Nothing about that was unusual. He came to greet her every day. Since he had his own schedule, the time of his visit wasn't predetermined, but he showed up particularly early that day. And he brought with him absurd news. They discussed it at length, but Hatsumi particularly remembered the conversation they'd had after that.

“Hero-dono, is there anything troubling you in your daily life?”

Weitzer was seated in a chair across from her and looked quite

serious. Hatsumi, however, responded with laughter.

“Nothing whatsoever. The housemaids all take very good care of me.”

“I’m glad to hear it. However, if anything does come up, please let me know immediately, Hero-dono. You are a most welcome guest of the state. There is no need to be shy. Please ask of me anything that you desire.”

“Then I’d like you to stop calling me ‘Hero-dono.’”

“What...?”

Weitzer looked astonished when she said that. He’d apparently never considered that that would be the first thing she asked for.

“That is... Um...”

Being a hero was a title of great honor, and Weitzer addressed her as such to show his respect. As royalty, there were very few people that decorum demanded he treat with such formality, so it meant something to him to be proper with the nation’s summoned hero. Realizing that she might have him between a rock and hard place, Hatsumi dropped the subject.

“I understand. The decision is yours.”

“As you wish.”

She gave him a way out, and Weitzer lightly bowed down his head. Rather than humility, he meant to show his respect. He knew that Hatsumi had trouble assuming her role as the hero. How could she with practically no knowledge of who she was? It just didn’t sit well with her. In fact, it was still bothering her even now.

“Hey, is it really true... that I’m a hero?”

It was a weighty question, but Weitzer didn’t hesitate to answer.

“But of course. Under the supervision of the Church of Salvation, we held the hero summoning ritual right here on the palace grounds. That was how you came to us. There is no mistaking it.”

“But still...”

Even if they called her a hero, what did that really mean? She knew that she’d been called here to defeat the demons, but it all felt oh-so unreal. Abstract, even. She and Weitzer both were looking for something more concrete.

“I have heard that the hero summoned by the summoning ritual receives a divine blessing from the Goddess.”

“But what does that mean? What is it specifically?”

“According to the legends, it is a power that cannot be achieved by normal means. Surely some of the tales are exaggerated, but there must be some sort of change you can feel. Something physical.”

“Hmm...”

“Nothing?”

“I mean, it’s not like I can compare how I feel now to how I felt before...”

“Surely there’s *something*.”

“If I had to say... I do feel like I can move around better than other people. I feel like I’m strong.”

With that, she held out her hand like she was asking Weitzer for a handshake. Taking a hint, he grasped her hand. She squeezed back.

“Th-This is...”

Weitzer looked stunned. And rightfully so—the grip she had on his hand was unlike anything a girl of her age and size should be able to produce. It was unquestionably superhuman. And upon realizing that, Weitzer’s eyes went even wider. This was tangible proof that she was the hero.

“This must be the power of the Goddess’s blessing...”

“Honestly, I have mixed feelings about it.”

“To us, it is a delight worth celebrating.”

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, their hero had come. To the people of this world, she was like a saint sent from the heavens. It was all quite confusing to Hatsumi, but she watched as Weitzer knit his brow. It seemed there was something else on his mind too.

“But for me, personally... I am somewhat disinclined to have you head to the battlefield.”

“...Yeah.”

It seemed that he was trying to be considerate of Hatsumi in his own way. But in the end, she could give him no encouragement or hope. Weitzer’s expression then became rather tense. It was the face he wore when he was addressing official business.

“Hero-dono, I must apologize for asking, but I would like to have you visit and observe the soldiers.”

“That’s what you were talking about yesterday, right?”

“Yes. The officers and men who are the pride of our army want to show off their training to you, Hero-dono.”

Of course, there was more to it than that. Training to show off

their skills to the hero was certainly good motivation for the army, but they wanted to inspire Hatsumi as well. They were hoping to trigger something in her as the hero. The demonstration wasn't the king's idea, but he was pressured into arranging it by the people around him—or so Selphy said. However...

They want to show off something like that to a woman...?

It very well may work on a man, but Hatsumi had a hard time imagining something like a military demonstration would ignite anything within her. She had no will to fight whatsoever, so perhaps they were just that desperate. Of course, it was also true that they were just eager to impress their female hero.

“What about Selphy?”

“She has other business to take care of, so though it may be presumptuous, I will accompany you today.”

This was unexpected. Normally Selphy was the one accompanied Hatsumi everywhere.

“Is that alright? You're a prince, after all. Don't you have something else to be doing?”

Hatsumi was concerned she might be keeping him from official duties, but Weitzer shook his head.

“I'm doing precisely what I should be. It is a great honor to serve as the hero's escort. Mind you, I think of it as a pleasure rather than an obligation.”

Weitzer made every possibly concession to make Hatsumi comfortable and put her at ease. He had his integrity, both as a prince and a gentleman.

“Thank you, Weitzer.”

“There is no need to thank me. I told you, it is both an honor and a pleasure. For you, Hero-dono, I would escort you to the ends of the earth.”

“That's going too far...”

“No, I truly—”

Just as Weitzer began to speak, hurried footsteps could be heard out in the hallway. They approached swiftly, and stopped just outside the door to the room.

“I wonder what's wrong...”

“It is taboo to run in the palace unless it is an emergency. Which means...”

“Something urgent has happened?”

Weitzer nodded with a grim expression and headed towards the

door. By the time he reached it, there was a knocking coming from the other side. It sounded like a palace guard. Weitzer opened the door and addressed him quietly. Their hushed conversation lasted for a few moments, and then the guard took his leave. Weitzer approached Hatsumi again, and took a knee before her.

“Hero-dono, I apologize for the suddenness, but I will have to excuse myself for a moment.”

“Did something happen?”

“No. Nothing that should trouble our hero.”

“...I see.”

Though he spoke of it like it was no big deal, it was quite clear something had indeed happened. Hatsumi was interested, but she didn't really want to pry. She saw Weitzer off, but even after he left, the dark expression on the guard's face weighed heavily on her mind. In the end, she gave in and went after Weitzer herself.

Asking the domestics where the prince had gone, Hatsumi followed after him. Ultimately, she found herself in front of the castle audience chamber. She politely acknowledged the guards at the door, but then heard an angry voice coming from the other side of it. It sounded like someone was yelling, but because the door to the audience chamber was closed, she couldn't make out what they were saying. Whatever it was, however, it didn't sound good. She decided to ask one of the guards what was going on.

“What's this?”

“That is... We cannot really say...”

The guard looked troubled. Realizing that he wasn't going to answer her directly, Hatsumi stepped forward.

“Open it,” she said unflinchingly.

“B-But...! Right now is...!”

“Please.”

The guards ended up yielding and obligingly opening the door for her. As one would expect, mere porters could not refuse a request from the hero. Realizing the position she'd put them in, Hatsumi apologized, and then entered the audience chamber. Inside, a dark-skinned, muscular man was frantically trying to appeal to the king of Miazen.

“While we sit here and do nothing, Larsheem is being assaulted!”

“I understand. But I cannot simply deploy the army immediately just at your request.”

“I’m begging you!”

The muscular man was antsy and restless like a caged animal—like he might lunge at any moment. It seemed whatever crisis was at hand had him extremely on edge. So much so that he even dared to speak disrespectfully to the king. But perhaps because they understood the dire nature of his circumstances, nobody present in the audience chamber said anything about it. Even the king looked sympathetic, but his position demanded that he stay stern.

“Forvan-dono, I understand your plight, but do calm yourself.”

“Then...?”

It seemed the man was expecting the king to follow up in some way, but he said nothing more. Undeterred, the muscular man continued to plead his case. As he and the king talked, Hatsumi looked around the room. Among the officials and generals present, Hatsumi spotted Selphy and quietly headed over to her.

“Hatsumi?! What are you doing here?!”

“Weitzer was visiting me, but had to leave suddenly when a guard came by. It piqued my interest.”

Hatsumi gave her the short of it, and Selphy looked quite taken by surprise. Before she could get in a word edgewise, Hatsumi asked her about the current situation.

“So, what’s going on Selphy?”

“...It seems that the demons have invaded Larsheem.”

“The demons...”

To the north of the Alliance was an empty belt of land that was neither demon nor human territory. The demon army had allegedly shown no signs of movement after their invasion of Noshias, but now they’d suddenly shown up in Larsheem, which lay at the northern end of the Alliance.

“It seems they were pretending to be docile when they were actually moving their troops all the way to the Alliance.”

“And... who is that man?”

“He’s one of the officers from Larsheem. With just the soldiers in Larsheem and the support they have from neighboring countries, they won’t make it. Which is why this man came to Miazen seeking aid.”

“It looks like the king isn’t considering his request favorably...”

Selphy returned a nod. The man earnestly pleaded with the king over and over, but it seemed the king was only placating him. Hatsumi had to wonder why.

“The Saadias Alliance was formed by the countries in the north to support each other, no? It’s not just an alliance in name. So it really alright not to send help at a time like this?”

“It’s just as you say. In the case that one country of the Alliance falls into crisis, the others are indeed meant to help. Alas, an army is not something that can be moved quickly.”

“I see...”

Selphy meant to say that was the real problem here. Larsheem needed immediate help, but getting a large, organized force there would take some time. Yet even so, the man still cried for Miazen’s aid. Quite contrary to his emotional roaring, Weitzer spoke to him in a calm, composed, and rational manner. But the answer didn’t change. There was nothing that could be done instantaneously. Nevertheless, it didn’t stop the man from asking—from trying. He was literally begging them to save his country. And it was a pitiful, desperate sight. The man was covered in injuries and bandages nearly from head to toe. He’d likely been fighting himself before coming to Miazen.

“Ah...”

Suddenly, the king and officials turned towards Hatsumi. She knew they were looking to her for help—for hope. But they quickly looked away. Based on what she’d done—or hadn’t—before now, they all likely thought of her as unreliable.

The man continued to plead with the king. The palace guards attempted to pull him away, but he was far too large and muscular for them to be able to restrain him. He shouted out in desperate defiance as they tried to force him to withdraw.

“Hngh...”

His roaring cry jolted Hatsumi. It felt like he was yelling directly inside her head. It echoed and reverberated in her skull like a clock tower bell. Then she saw something. Something strange.

“What...?”

As if she had vertigo, Hatsumi’s field of vision began to spin and shift. All she could see now was a gray backdrop through a black sandstorm. Before she knew it, she’d lost her sense of peripheral vision and could only see what was dead ahead of her. It was like watching a television. And then, just as suddenly as it had come, the sandstorm vanished like white noise when someone changed the channel.

But things weren’t back to normal just yet. What she saw next

wasn't the emotional scene unfolding in the audience chamber, but what looked like some kind of funeral service. Unable to move anything but her eyes, all she could do was watch.

It was a Western-style funeral, and there were both Japanese and foreigners in attendance. It was a big, diverse group, but everyone was dressed in all black. The deceased would be dearly missed, that much was certain. Hatsumi just didn't know who it was.

But there was one face she did recognize. The boy reading a eulogy before the crowd of mourners looked like an older version of the boy she'd seen many times in her dreams. And it seemed the biggest loss was his. As he read, she could hear him say things like "father" and "only family." He must have been in the throes of grief. There were hardly words to express the anguish of being alone in the world at such a young age.

But even so, he only looked ahead. Since he would be walking forward alone from here on out, he couldn't afford to hang his head. He read his father's eulogy stoutly without even a sign of letting tears or woe stop him. His resolute black eyes stared into the gray, cloudy distance. Then the channel suddenly seemed to change again and Hatsumi was seeing the living room of some house. The same boy was there, muttering something in his sleep.

"I... must keep going forward in order to realize the dream my father preached to me... without fail. If I stop, it will end right here. That's why... I have to go save them."

Perhaps that was why he hadn't shown an ounce of weakness while everyone else was mourning. But after subconsciously affirming his resolve, he quietly fell into a deep slumber. The funeral, the service, meeting with everyone who'd come to pay their respects... All of it must have been exhausting. But now, peering at his sleeping face, Hatsumi could see a single tear streaming down his cheek.

Was this vision a flashback of one of her missing memories? The screen of her mind briefly returned to the black sandstorm before cutting back to reality. She could once again hear the angry shouting of the man from Larsheem, and she could make out Weitzer standing in front of him. It was the same scene as before.

"Ah..."

"Are you alright, Hatsumi? What's the matter?" Selphy asked.

"Y-Yeah... I'm alright."

Selphy seemed concerned, likely because Hatsumi looked dazed. But Hatsumi could tell based on the conversation Weitzer was having with the man that she'd only been out of it for a split second. But that was all it took. Within that split second, Hatsumi had made up her mind. Stepping away from Selphy, she walked over to Weitzer and the man from Larsheem.

"I'll go."

"Huh? Who the hell are you?"

The man looked quite puzzled at a young girl suddenly cutting into the conversation. But so did Weitzer, who inadvertently revealed her identity in a cry of surprise.

"Hero-dono?!"

"Wait, you're the hero?"

"Yes. My name is Kuchiba Hatsumi, and I seem to be the hero summoned by the Alliance."

At that, the man sneered and snorted.

"Oh yeah? I heard the summoned hero was a coward who wouldn't raise a hand against a fly after being summoned."

"You bastard! You will mind your manners in front of the hero!" Weitzer immediately reprimanded him.

"Ha! It's the truth, ain't it? If it wasn't, then there's no way she'd be sittin' in here with what's happening out there."

"Th-That's... There are extenuating circumstances..." Weitzer said, his voice shrinking.

"Yeah, they call that cowardice."

That much was undeniable. Even though she'd been the victim of some very bizarre events, it was true she'd done nothing. She was simply hiding away while she waited for the pleasantries to end. It was the opposite of what that boy had done. He'd kept his chin up and stared his future right in the eye, no matter how grim or scary it was. If he could see her now, he'd surely call her a coward too.

Hatsumi looked at the man from Larsheem and met his derisive gaze.

"What? You got something to say?"

"I do. Whether I can fight or not... Would you like to test that right now?"

"Hatsumi?!"

"Hero-dono?!"

"You little punk..."

Selphy and Weitzer both looked on the verge of panic, but the

man bared his fangs. After coming here straight from the battlefield and getting into it with the king, it seemed he was raring to go.

The man forcefully shook off the palace guards still trying to restrain him. They were hardly a match for him, and were flung this way and that. Hatsumi started to walk towards them at a good clip... and deftly drew the sword hanging at Weitzer's waist. She then took a stance in front of the man from Larsheem, the tip of her sword pointed upward at his eyes. It seemed that was all it took to summon her knowledge of swordsmanship.

"What?! My sword is—"

Hatsumi could hear Weitzer's belated reaction. It was only after seeing it flicker in the mana lamps of the audience chamber that he realized his sword was in her hands. He still had no idea how it had gotten there, however.

As such, there was absolutely nothing he could have done to stop her. The man before her, who'd seen it all happen in the blink of an eye, was also completely bewildered. Seeing that he had no intention of assuming a stance to fight her, Hatsumi made her move. She lunged at his chest, closing the distance between them in a flash. The man could only stare wide-eyed as she came at him.

However, her blade never reached him. It only sliced through the air next to him. It seemed that, though she was initially coming at his chest, she'd taken a step to the right as she leaped.

"Is this sufficient?" she asked.

The man gritted his teeth, vexed he hadn't been able to see through her.

"You sayin' I would've died from that just now? As expected of a hero, but—"

Was he trying to offer her some candid advice, perhaps? He didn't get to finish. In the middle of his sentence, a heavy boom rang out behind him. Just over his shoulder, the stone pillars that held up decorative flags near the entrance to the audience chamber collapsed to the ground. It looked as though they'd been split clean in half. Watching them crumble, the name of the technique she'd just used came to Hatsumi's mind.

"The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani's 'Long Sword of the Absolute Edge.'"

Everyone in the chamber was at a loss for words over what had just happened. Two stone pillars—both of which were well outside of Hatsumi's reach—were toppled without her ever touching them.

Their surprise was perfectly understandable.

“Th-The pillars!”

“Impossible! From that one swing...?!”

She could hear disbelief worm its way through the crowd. Hatsumi then turned a rather casual question on the startled spectators... who had apparently quite misunderstood what had just happened.

“Those are the monsters that I must defeat, correct?”

Just then, there was the sound of something else crumbling to the floor. When everyone turned once more to look in the direction of the pillars, they now saw a grotesque figure that had been cut into pieces. It was an ugly creature, like an abomination straight from a fantasy story—except this one was very, vividly real. It had horns, and both its skin and the blood flowing out of it were red. Its white, dead eyes were rolled back into its skull.

“A demon?!” Weitzer exclaimed.

“To think they would have spies all the way over here...” the man from Larsheem said bitterly, irritated at his own negligence.

“When did you realize?” Weitzer asked, turning to Hatsumi.

“As soon as I took hold of the sword. Your senses also sharpen with a sword in your hand, don’t they, Weitzer?”

“That’s true, but...”

Even so, it was a little extreme. As Weitzer reconciled with his own bewilderment, Hatsumi turned to the man from Larsheem.

“So, are you still unsatisfied with my abilities?”

“...No. I’m honestly amazed, Hero-sama. I had no idea. I completely take back everything I said earlier.”

All the hostility he’d been carrying with him vanished with a sigh. Hatsumi then turned back to Weitzer, who was still standing there in a daze. She carefully held out his sword to him, pommel first, with an apologetic expression on her face.

“Sorry for taking it without asking.”

“No, Hero-dono! Not at all! Your skill with it is magnificent—No, divine! I am completely humbled.”

“Calling it divine is going a little too far...”

“Certainly not! To be able to cut such a large stone pillar in a single swing without magic... Such a feat is ordinarily impossible.”

Weitzer was uncommonly excited, and Hatsumi replied nearly without thinking.

“What are you saying? A swordsman who can only cut things

within their range is...”

“Oh?”

“Huh? Oh...!”

It was almost like her mouth was moving on its own. She hardly knew what she was saying, so she clammed up before she said anything she might regret. Since she’d cut herself off in the middle of sentence, however, Weitzer looked at her curiously.

“Is something the matter?”

“N-No, nothing. Anyway...”

Hatsumi briefly retreated into her head to contemplate things. Was it really alright for her to step into this battle? Was it the right choice? They were difficult questions, but then she recalled the words of the boy in her dream. She had her answer.

“Where are the people that need to be saved?”

Her bold words echoed through the audience chamber, stunning all who were present into silence. That was the beginning of the fighting for Kuchiba Hatsumi, the girl who’d lost her past.

It was remembering the boy in her dream that gave her the courage to look up and move forward. She had to. In order for her to keep her head held high when she finally saw him next, she had to follow in his footsteps. She had to keep going.

And reflecting on that now, as she lay on her bed after the night’s incidents, she came to a certain realization.

“I see... It was what he said...”

The reason the boy who’d intruded in her room made her feel somewhat nostalgic was because he spoke the same way the boy in her dreams did.



Currently, Suimei and the others were gathering for a light meal at a restaurant that was something like a tea house, but not everyone was present. It was only Suimei, Felmenia, and Lefille so far. Liliana was running late and hadn’t made it yet.

“So, how are things going on your end?” Suimei asked, turning to Felmenia who was sitting next to him.

“There... wasn’t any particularly useful information,” she replied meekly.

“Figured as much. I wasn’t really expecting anything to crop up after just a couple of days...”

Hearing this, Lefille knit her brow and joined the conversation.

"I also didn't hear anything about a trespasser infiltrating the palace. They all want to talk about the hero, but it's the same old thing."

The day after Suimei snuck into Calnus Palace, he'd asked Felmenia and the others help him with gathering information regarding not just Hatsumi, but also affairs in Miazen more generally. To confirm Hatsumi's situation, Suimei knew he'd have to sneak back into the palace, but he wanted to learn as much as he could before then.

The night he'd seen Hatsumi, she mentioned that she had amnesia. So one of the first things he tried to investigate was how that might have happened and if was indeed really amnesia. He and the girls had spent two or three days now trying to get to the bottom of it, but in the end, they hadn't come up with anything useful in their scouring. It was almost like there was a gag order surrounding information involving the hero. Everyone they talked to about her would only say that she was beautiful, talented with a sword, or some other generic fact; none of it was useful. Hearing that Felmenia and Lefille had come to the same dead end he had, Suimei limply put his chin on the table and sighed.

"To think we wouldn't hear anything at all..."

"Indeed. Usually there's at least *someone* with gossip..."

It was strange. To the people of this world, heroes were like celebrities. There was a great deal of interest about them, and under normal circumstances, the people would be clamoring to get the latest scoop on their local hero. But just as Felmenia said, there wasn't even gossip about Hatsumi.

It was the same regarding news of the palace infiltration. It seemed the matter was being kept hush-hush. The people of the city were apparently none the wiser about it. But that much was to be expected. After all, a stranger had not only infiltrated the palace, but had gotten away. Of course the palace wouldn't want word of that spreading. It was no coincidence, however, that the number of guards patrolling the city had increased over the past couple of days.

While Suimei and the girls were in the middle of talking about all this, the teahouse doorbell jingled. The three of them all turned towards the entrance, but there was no one there. At least, it didn't look like it. But there was an unmistakable presence that had

entered the building. Just as they tried to focus on it, Liliana pulled out a chair at the table and sat down.

“You made it.”

“Yes, just now. Also... the notebook you gave me was very useful.”

The emotions showing on her face were faint, but Liliana was both surprised and impressed. Before they’d split up to gather information, Suimei had given each of them a notebook filled with white paper. It seemed it had come in handy.

“How was it for you three?” Liliana asked.

“I failed to produce anything of merit. In the end, today’s search was fruitless as well.”

“Same for me.”

“I did get some people to talk to me, but... it was mostly nothing but rumors with poor credibility and stories that were erratically dramatized. Getting information from the Church of Salvation was my last resort, but it seems they don’t really know anything either. I had to give up there.”

No one really had anything to show for themselves. Except for Liliana. It seemed she’d at least gotten a taste of something.

“I also didn’t hear too much... but I did get a little something.”

“Really?” asked Suimei.

“Yes. I have it all here,” she replied with a nod.

Liliana then pulled out her notebook and began relaying what she’d learned to her companions.

“There isn’t much information going around town about the hero Hatsumi Kuchiba, which it seems you all experienced firsthand.”

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Suimei asked.

“It is. The lack of information on the hero is outright baffling. It’s possible that the citizens have information, but are unwilling to share. But it’s particularly unusual that the Church of Salvation seems to know nothing. In general, most heroes have an attendant from the church in their retinue. At the very least, they have a contact within the church that they report to. This is largely why the church is so well-informed in regards to the heroes and their exploits. There are exceptions like Reiji-sama, however. And I believe in this case that the royal family of Miazen is monopolizing information on Hatsumi Kuchiba.”

“So it’s the state?”

“It’s probable that they don’t want the church to interfere while they use the hero to earn glory as quickly as possible. Fairly transparent, don’t you think?”

If what Liliana was suggesting was true, it would explain why Felmenia, who usually brought back solid information, had turned up emptyhanded. But as a completely separate matter entirely, Suimei couldn’t help but notice Liliana was speaking more smoothly than usual today. Normally she spoke at a tottering pace, but perhaps this was normal when she was giving a work-related report.

“Now, moving on to Hatsumi Kuchiba herself, it seems she is unable to use magic. Though I believe Suimei already knows this, she is apparently quite skilled with a blade. Her sword style is called... the Phantom Sword of the Kuru-ri-ku-kara Dhara... rarara?”

Having trouble making heads or tails of it, Liliana was frowning as she tilted her head from side to side.

“The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani,” said Suimei.

“Yes, that’s it. Also, as you mentioned before, Hatsumi Kuchiba may have amnesia.”

“Did you find out any of the details?”

“It seems that the soldiers who fought alongside her often heard her express concern over her lost memories to her companions. At the very least, it seems certain her memory has been compromised in some way. As you suggested before, Suimei, it may be wise to look into the possibility that she is being brainwashed... though it is difficult to imagine someone being able to do that to a hero under the Goddess’s protection.”

“Yeah. It’d be pretty hard to magically influence someone who’s protected by a power of a higher-order than magic, if you think about it.”

Liliana nodded. Looking at her, a certain doubt crossed Suimei’s mind.

“At any rate, I’m surprised the soldiers talked to you.”

“I heard the heroic tales the soldiers were telling about how they defeated the demons. Men like that are all around. And once they start getting heated up talking about it, their lips loosen on other subjects as well.”

“I see. So they just need a little riling, huh?”

“They’re also less guarded around people my age. Though I had to tolerate them reeking of liquor,” she declared flatly.

To use her own physical appearance in such a way... It seemed

she was indeed a first-rate spy, even at her age. She was quite a terrifying little girl. Having heard enough on that point, however, he urged her to continue.

“Then, next is the information I obtained regarding Hatsumi Kuchiba’s companions. First off is the martial artist from Larsheem, Gaius Forvan. It seems he was a well-known man to begin with, and I’ll leave his abilities for later. Apparently when the demons invaded Larsheem not all that long ago, he came to Miazen to appeal to the king directly. The king was apparently unable to send troops right away, but Hatsumi Kuchiba offered her support, and that was the beginning of their relationship. Then there’s the mage named Selphy Fittney. She is a mysterious figure, but she was the mage brought over from the self-governed state to summon Hatsumi Kuchiba. Her specialties are wind and ice magic, earning her the title of ‘Snowstorm.’ This is just speculation on my part, but on the fragments of information I procured, I believe she may be a half-elf. The way I distinguish between an elf and a half-elf is entirely based on the Colonel’s style, but again, I’m not completely certain on this point.”

Suimei was a bit stunned. Liliana had exaggerated a bit when she said she’d gotten “a little something.” She’d practically turned into a fountain of information. Felmenia and Lefille were both listening in astonishment as well.

“Her third and final companion is Weitzer Ryerzen, the crown prince of Miazen. He is one of the Seven Swords who is also known by his title: ‘Cloud of Death.’ At last year’s Seven Sword Kings festival, he earned a reputation for defeating Princess Titania Root Astel in a fierce battle. According to the rumors, he was charmed by Hatsumi Kuchiba’s skill with a blade and has been following her around like an attendant.”

Suimei was impressed Liliana had gone as far as investigating Hatsumi’s companions.

“...So you even investigated them too, huh?”

“I believed it to be necessary.”

He should have known better. This really was about what he should have expected from a former intelligence agency operative. Suimei was belatedly beginning to understand how she’d earned her place in the Elite Twelve.

“That’s about it, right...?”

“Sound like it.”

Suimei and Felmenia assumed that had to be the end of the intelligence she'd gathered and went to move the conversation forward, but Liliana shyly spoke up again.

"No, um, there's still more..."

"Oh, really? What else did you get?"

"Well, it's about the state of affairs regarding palace's security."

"What...?"

"WUH?!"

Felmenia was surprised, but Suimei could only make some strange noise to express his shock. Lefille simply sat there in silence, stunned. She could hardly believe what Liliana had accomplished.

"L-Lily, you even gathered that kind of information?"

"Yes. That's the most critical information... isn't it?"

"Y-You... You're certainly right."

Lefille couldn't argue there. But she, just like Suimei and Felmenia, didn't know what else to say. They all assumed that it would be impossible to get any substantial intelligence on the palace. But lo and behold, Liliana had done it.

"As expected, after Suimei infiltrated the other day, security was tightened. During the day, the guard has increased twofold. And at night, threefold with frequent shift changes. It's a countermeasure to prevent any suspicious persons from mixing in with the guards. The patrols around the palace have also increased across the board. At night, it also seems they're employing a number of skilled swordsmen and mages. Though I don't think any of them would be much of a threat for you, Suimei..."

"Well, I'll manage one way or other on that front."

"I'm sure. Now, regarding Hatsumi Kuchiba's personal security... Ever since the incident, it seems she is escorted everywhere."



Both Felmenia and Lefille nodded, as this was pretty much on par with what they'd expected. It was fairly predictable that they'd double up on guards and such after what had happened.

"So it'll all be a pain now..."

"So it seems..."

Suimei let out a groan, and Felmenia nodded. If Hatsumi always had a bodyguard now, it would be much harder to get to her. All Suimei wanted to do was talk, but if the other side considered him an enemy, he very well may be attacked on sight. And since he really didn't want to fight anyone, the difficulty of just having a conversation with Hatsumi had gone up considerably. And then, as if to emphasize her next point, Liliana narrowed her amber left eye before speaking again.

"However... I don't know the reason for it, but for some time now, it seems that Hatsumi Kuchiba goes out on her own late at night."

"Is that seriously true?"

"At least from what I've heard. And with that, would it not be possible to meet her without anyone else around?"

"It just might..."

Certainly, if she were alone, Suimei would at least be able to talk to her. She might be hostile towards him too, but the chances of things breaking out into an actual fight would be much lower. Moreover...

"..."

"...Is something wrong?"

Finding Suimei just staring right at her to be rather strange, Liliana questioned him. But in truth, she was hardly as puzzled as he was. He was completely stumped as to how she'd managed to gather this kind of information.

"Nothing. I was just thinking that this is what I should have expected from a professional."

Suimei was the one to praise her, but it seemed Felmenia was of the same mind.

"From now on, should we leave this sort of thing to Lily?"

"Sounds like it. Liliana, do you want a drink?"

"Yes. It's been a while since I talked so much, so my throat is rather dry..."

She had indeed talked far more than usual today. Not just with Suimei and the others, but with everyone she'd made contact with while gathering information. It was probably exhausting, especially for someone like Liliana. While Suimei called the waiter over and ordered some honey water, Liliana looked up at him meekly.

"Um, Suimei, was I helpful?"

"Far more than I could have asked for. Thank you."

"Thank goodness..." she said, a gentle smile on her lips.

The server quickly brought Liliana her honey water, and after that, Suimei and the girls spent some time relaxing at the teahouse. By the time they settled their tab and left, the sky was painted red in the hues of the setting sun that shone down on them brilliantly. They began making their way back towards their lodgings, happily chatting away as they walked down the street together. Partway there, however, they spotted two familiar faces up ahead.

Standing next to each other on the sidewalk were a therianthrope woman with pink hair, dressed in religious garb, and a girl about Lilliana's height who had bright blue hair and something running from her cheek down onto her neck that looked like a tattoo.

"Oh?"

"Oh my!"

Suimei and the therianthrope's eyes met, and they both exclaimed at the completely unexpected coincidental encounter. It was Clarissa, the nun he'd met at the Church of Salvation in the Empire. And the shorter girl standing next to her was the dwarf Jillbert Griga.

"Well, if it isn't Clarissa-san."

"Well, well, Suimei-sama. What a coincidence, running into you in a place like this."

"It's been a while."

After Suimei gave her a light bow and a polite greeting, he looked at her companion.

"And the little... I mean... Jillbert is with you too, huh?"

"Hey, you devious pedophile punk. Were you in the middle of saying something else? Well? And what's with dropping the formalities with me, huh? Huh?"

Quite displeased with Suimei's manner of speaking, Jillbert glared at him. Acting like he was sensitive to the steam coming out of her ears, Suimei waved his hand in front of him.

“Yeah, yeah. Put a sock in it already.”

“Why are you treating Clarissa so differently, anyway?”

“It’s cause you go on and on about me being a pervert all the time. So? What are you doing all the way out here?”

“It ain’t any of your business. The hell are *you* doing here?”

Suimei and Jillbert began glaring daggers at each other.

Ignoring their little scuffle, Felmenia politely greeted Clarissa.

“It has been a long time, sister. You were of great help the other day.”

Felmenia thanked her for her help arbitrating at the Twilight Pavilion in the Empire, and Clarissa returned an equally polite reply.

“Not at all. It really has been a long time as well, silver-haired one.”

“I am Felmenia Stingray. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sister Clarissa.”

Their conversation couldn’t have been in starker contrast to the spat going on between Suimei and Jillbert. But something suddenly seemed to be wrong. Suimei watched curiously as Jillbert’s pupils became tiny dots. She seemed to be looking over his shoulder.

“Le... fille?”

“Yup... it’s me. It’s been a while, Jill.”

Lefille greeted Jillbert with an awkward smile. Now that Suimei thought about it, they hadn’t seen each other since before the incidents in the Empire were resolved. Picking up on this too, Clarissa cocked her head to the side like she was seeing something unbelievable.

“It’s been a while, sister.”

“Oh... oh my! Oh me, oh my!”

As Lefille greeted Clarissa, Jillbert continued to shout in surprise.

“Y-You’re really Lefille after all?! What does this mean?! When did you get so big?”

“U-Um, you see...”

“Lefille-chan, in the short while it’s been since we’ve seen each other, you’ve become quite a lady.”

“No, sister, it’s not really like that. Um...”

Clarissa was playing the fool as she clapped her hands and rejoiced over Lefille’s sudden growth spurt. Lefille was troubled as to how to deal with her, but Jillbert couldn’t help cutting in with a

quip.

“You stupid cat! That ain’t what this is! Lady or not, no matter how you look at it, she’s gotten way too big, damn it! Lefille, just what is...”

“There are... It’s complicated. Though I do think I’ve mentioned it before, Jill.”

“Hm? Hmm...? Aah! Now that you mention it, you were always talking about your original form or something like that, right? I thought that was all just a bunch of kid’s nonsense and ignored it though...”

Recalling that Lefille had indeed warned her about something like this, Jillbert trailed off with a blank look on her face. Of course she’d ignored it in the past, but seeing her nonchalant attitude without a hint of timidity now, Lefille’s shoulders drooped.

“You’re really quite cruel...”

“Don’t worry about it! Shouldn’t we just be celebrating your return to your original form? Well, I gotta say, I am worried about just how big you got...”

Jillbert went from a cheerful attitude to a frankly despondent one in an instant.

“Why’s that?”

“Hahh... I mean, my cute little Lefille is now bigger than me, you know? To think that I won’t be able to savor the inexplicably precious sensation of holding you anymore...”

“Look who’s the pervert now!” Suimei snorted.

Ever since they’d first met, she’d relentlessly—and unfairly—called Suimei a pedophile. But to see that she was blind to her own wicked desires... Jillbert’s expression then suddenly changed, and her face looked something like a Hannya mask.

“Shut up, you big pervert! It’s fine if it’s me! My heart ain’t tainted like yours is. As for you, Lefille! Become tiny like you were right this instant! And then give me a great big hug!”

“Jill! Don’t be unreasonable!”

“It’s not unreasonable! Just do it already!”

“J-Jill...”

As Jill was raising a fuss and making unreasonable demands, Lefille let out a whimper of a squeal like she was going to cry. It was rather pitiful. Meanwhile, Liliana—who was standing behind Suimei—observed all of this like it had nothing to do with her.

“Lefille... has it quite bad, huh?”

When she spoke, it seemed that Clarissa noticed her presence and cocked her head to the side as she peeked at her.

“Oh? Aren’t you...”

“Ah, um, she’s...”

Suimei couldn’t immediately come up with any clever to say. Since Clarissa had also spent time living in the Empire, he couldn’t come up with a good excuse. But it seemed it would have been pointless anyway. Clarissa knew exactly who she was.

“You are the daughter of Colonel Rogue from the imperial army, correct?”

Liliana’s eye opened wide.

“Do you... know me?”

“Your father always came to pray at the church with such a serious look on his face. So yes, in a way, I’m familiar with you.”

“Colonel... did...?”

It seemed that not even Liliana had known about his prayers. But now that Suimei thought back on it, the first time he’d seen Rogue was leaving the Church of Salvation. It wasn’t hard to imagine he was the religious type.

It was Jillbert who spoke up next. It seemed she too recognized Liliana, who was currently looking quite uncomfortable.

“Aah, yeah. Those incidents were really something, huh?” she said, trying to engage her in friendly conversation to put her at ease.

“No...”

“I also lived in the Empire, you know. If I can be of any help, don’t be afraid to ask.”

“...Thank you very much.”

Perhaps Jillbert sympathized with her. After Jillbert slapped her shoulder, Liliana showed her gratitude with a light bow. And as their somewhat awkward exchange drew to a close, Jillbert looked up at Suimei.

“So? Why’re you guys in the Alliance?”

“We’re sightseeing. After the incidents, we’re taking a little vacation to unwind.”

“Hmm? It’s quite admirable for a dirtbag like you.”

“I swear, every single word out of your mouth...”

Jillbert smirked. She seemed to be enjoying herself. Suimei returned a stern look of irritation, his forehead twitching. He had to consider the possibility he’d be doing everyone a favor by ripping

out her forked tongue. Lefille then joined the conversation.

“So what are you doing here in the Alliance, sister? Jill?”

“We have work on top of sightseeing.”

“Me and Clara go way back. I have dwarf acquaintances in the weaponsmithing district, so we’re doing our rounds to say hi.”

“I’m here for a church inspection in the Alliance, you see. And since we both had business here, we came to visit Miazen together.”

“How wonderful.”

After some more idle chatter by the roadside, the two women parted ways with Suimei’s group and headed north. Suimei looked a little surprised as he watched them walk off into the evening.

“Well... That was quite the strange coincidence, huh?”

“So it was. I never would have imagined that we were fated to meet the two of them in Miazen.”

Felmenia agreed with Suimei. As she did, Lefille looked up at the eastern sky, which had begun to darken.

“We should also be heading back. It’s already dusk.”

“Yes... Let us go.”

With that, Suimei and the girls headed back to their lodgings before it got completely dark.



After separating from Suimei and the others, Clarissa and Jillbert went deep within the weaponsmithing district to a vacant lot where scrap metal was being temporarily stored, far, far away from any of the main streets. It was already well into twilight by the time they made it there. It was right about the time of day that indoor lights and the mana streetlamps began cutting on here and there.

Feeling an indescribable sense of nostalgia as she looked up at the obscured indigo night sky, Jillbert climbed up onto an empty box that smelled of iron and took a seat.

“Hup!”

Finding a good place to sit and calm herself, Jillbert smiled. Without thinking of anything, she gazed at the black smoke gushing out from the chimneys of the smithies. Eventually, she shifted her gaze over to Clarissa, who for some reason, twisted her face into a gloomy expression.

“...This place is not very comfortable.”

"You think? I quite like it. You can hear the sound of forge hammers and bellows all over the place."

"I'm sure those are all nice, comforting things to you, but that is not the case for me."

With that, Clarissa covered her ears and curled up her tail. The constant sound of striking metal coming from the smithies must have been far too noisy for her sensitive therianthrope ears. Witnessing the rare scene of Clarissa curling up her tail, Jillbert giggled lightly before showing her a relieved face.

"I'm happy about Lonely Shadow's daughter, though."

"...Yes, you are right."

"Earlier you pretended not to notice her right away, but you were just playing dumb, weren't you?"

"Naturally. Please to not underestimate the eyes of a therianthrope. Though I am honestly relieved to see her somewhat cheerful."

Hearing Clarissa talk about the girl that way, Jillbert's happy smile turned into a wicked one.

"What's that? Feeling guilty?"

"Like you should be talking. Earlier when you were talking to the darkness, to Liliana Zandyke, you were trying to atone, weren't you?"

"Hmph. It was our carelessness that caused her trouble, and in the end, we didn't do anything about it. That was the least I could do..."

Jillbert cast her eyes down timidly. Liliana was never meant to go through the kind of suffering she had during Romeon's mission. Really, Clarissa and Jillbert could be appropriately blamed for letting it happen. It was somewhat convenient to only talk about the sins they were carrying after all this time, but it was about all they could do. Accordingly, Clarissa returned Jillbert a knowing nod.

"Certainly. But our worries are perhaps just needless anxiety now."

"You saying that just because she's together with that punk?"

"Yes."

As Clarissa gave a pleasant smile, Jillbert glared back at her like something had just dawned on her.

"So, why is the Lonely Shadow's daughter together with that asshole? Did you do something behind the scenes?"

“No, I did no such thing.”

“Then...?”

“According to the Lonely Shadow, Suimei-sama was the one to strike down Romeon.”

“Wuh? That guy? That’s a joke, right? That kind of third-rate punk really did that?”

“Yes.”

Clarissa replied without hesitation. Like she found this absolutely unbelievable, Jillbert made an enormous frown. A third voice then suddenly came out of nowhere.

“Oh? You met the human who brought an end to that uproar?”

It was the voice of a young man. Looking around, the girls saw a dragonnewt standing at the entrance to the vacant plot. His bright green hair was blowing in the gentle breeze. Behind his ears were two silver horns. He was wearing white clothing that looked like traditional Japanese attire, his arms were hidden within his long sleeves.

“You always just show up out of nowhere, huh? But setting that aside, you’re late.”

As Jillbert looked at him critically, Eanru cheerfully laughed like he felt no guilt on that front.

“Aah, sorry, sorry. I had some minor business elsewhere. So, about what you were just talking about...”

“About that punk?”

“I can confirm what Clarissa said. I’m sure the Lonely Shadow said the man’s name was Suimei... Or something like that, right?”

“Dragon, is that really true?”

Jillbert narrowed her eyes and looked at him with full attention, and Eanru nodded back to her.

“If it is as the Lonely Shadow says, then yes. Based on his account, it seems that man saw through all of Romeon’s spells and called down the stars from the heavens to defeat him and the darkness covering him. The Lonely Shadow didn’t give any more detail than that though... It’s a shame I wasn’t part of your fortunate chance encounter with him.”

After hearing the abridged explanation of what happened, admiration showed on Jillbert’s face.

“Man... That punk really defeated Romeon when he went berserk, huh? He sure looks like a total stooge, though.”

“Au contraire, Jill. Even back at the Twilight Pavilion in the

Empire, when Suimei-sama confronted the hero from El Meide, he completely overwhelmed him.”

“He did that to the hero from El Meide? That hero, if I remember right... he was quite capable, wasn’t he? Wasn’t there talk of him from the beginning about fighting and beating up those damn demons?”

Remembering Elliot’s prowess on the battlefield the moment he was summoned, Jillbert looked at Clarissa like she didn’t believe her at all.

“Oh my, Jill. Are you doubting my eyes?”

“The hero has the divine protection from the summoning ritual, right? There’s no way there’s anyone with the power to surpass that.”

“Oh? In that case, what does that make us?”

“Exceptions.”

“In that case, it is not that strange for there to be other exceptions, correct?”

“...”

Jillbert gave Clarissa’s sophistry a disbelieving grimace. Clarissa then shook her head and continued.

“The mana filling Suimei-sama’s body far exceeds what the hero from El Meide possesses. Therefore, there is no mistaking the fact that the power he possess exceeds that of the hero from El Meide.”

Clarissa asserted this with an unwavering gaze. Thinking it sounded a little like she was praising Suimei, Jillbert suddenly realized something.

“Hey, Clara. Could it be that he’s the guy you were thinking of pulling in as a companion earlier?”

“Indeed.”

As Clarissa nodded, telling her she was right on the mark, Jillbert pressed her hand to her face.

“Hey... Really, that punk...?”

“He defeated Romeon after he was taken in by the power of darkness. Do you have any doubt about his capabilities?”

“That’s... I don’t have any objections there, but...”

“I don’t mind at all as long as he’s strong.”

Eanru was a simpleton, but Jillbert remained unconvinced. Her expression was still quite grim. She was making a face like something unpleasant was stuck between her teeth. Seeing her look that way, Clarissa spoke up once more.

“Jill, do you hate him that much?”

“It’s not really like that, but he gets along well with Lefille. And right now, he’s taking care of the Lonely Shadow’s daughter, right? If something happens, I would feel sorry for those guys.”

“Oh my, you are quite kindhearted after all, aren’t you?”

“Th-That’s not really the case...”

As Clarissa smiled and pointed that out, Jill was in a fluster. She banged on the crate she was sitting on and looked away while turning red. And then, in a complete one-eighty, she made a restless and doubtful expression before questioning Clarissa.

“But Clara, why do you want him so badly? To do what we must, just strength isn’t...”

“I first laid my eyes on him after the matter with El Meide’s hero, but my recommendation is also based on other factors. Romeon, for example.”

With that as a preface, Clarissa went on to explain her reasoning.

“When Suimei-sama first got involved in that incident, it was to protect the small Lefille-san from the inexplicable expectations of the Goddess. And to that end, everything would have been resolved if all he did was capture the culprit behind the incidents, Liliana Zandyke. But Suimei-sama was not seduced by the short-term, and didn’t lose sight of his own sense of justice. He focused on what he should be doing, regardless of the hardships it would cause him, and saved Liliana, who was also a victim in it all. Honestly speaking, I was surprised anyone in this world even has that kind of determination.”

“Well, certainly I do find that quite admirable, but...”

“Are you saying that seriously?”

Clarissa’s chilling tone made Jillbert hesitate. Her cold words implied Jillbert was missing something.

“Jill, did you not feel it? When Suimei-sama and the others were walking straight towards us, they all had a gentle appearance. Lefille-san, Stingray-san, and Liliana Zandyke were all smiling. When I saw the way they were, it looked dazzling to me.”

“That’s...”

It was in complete contrast with Jillbert’s first impression of Suimei. And maybe it was that contrast that triggered something in her now. Earlier, Suimei and the others were walking together while having a pleasant conversation about trifling matters. It was

almost like they were living a completely normal, peaceful life.

A happy group of friends was a common sight that could be seen anywhere. But after all the suffering they faced in the Empire, it was something special with this particular group. Not even Jillbert could deny that.

Within that circle of smiles, there was a young girl who should have been tormented by darkness. From what Jillbert had heard, this young girl had spent each day since she was a child walking further and deeper into the darkness. No one would have been surprised if it swallowed her whole. So just how was it she was able to smile like that now?

It was a smile from the heart. One that said she was truly at peace. One that said she was free of darkness's grasp. A smile that was proof she had been saved, you could say.

It was likely that smile was but a single thread of hope in the tangled web of possible fates buried underneath the darkness. It was safe to assume that all other threads would have led only to despair. But that man had struggled to grab hold of that one thread. He won a victory over the Goddess that could only be called a miracle.

They were completely ignorant of exactly how he'd accomplished such a feat. But the reason she was so entranced by him was because his figure as he walked into the sunset appeared more dazzling than the sun itself.

"...But even so, I still don't think it's a good fit."

"Even though you see why I do?"

"It's precisely because of that, Clara. I understand that that punk doesn't operate out in the open. I also get that he's like us in that he's different. But I don't think he's the same different we are. He's too dazzling. If we're the darkness of the world, then he's the light within the darkness. And in the darkness, he shines even brighter. The light he gives off is spectacular. So how can you say he's like us when both of us know better? That punk should never mix with people like us."

"That... Certainly may be true."

The reason Clarissa agreed was likely because she shared the same premonition. And then, as if pouring water on their little exchange, Eanru cut in to the conversation.

"There may be no need to worry about it so much, you two. Those who are strong mesh well together. After meeting with you two and having defeating Romeon, he may already be rolled up in

it all anyway.”

“Don’t say that kinda crap, dragon. You really can’t read the room, can you?”

“I’m only saying it’s a possibility.”

“That’s what I’m saying is crap.”

“In that case, should I just not talk?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, damn it.”

One of them was dead serious and the other was utterly exasperated. Clarissa interrupted there to get back to the main matter at hand.

“By the way, Eanru, how is that matter we talked about?”

“Hmm? Aah, now that you mention it, we’ve been ignoring her.”

“Huh?”

“The one right behind me is the hero who was summoned in Thoria. Crimson Pain brought her along this morning and handed her over to the Lonely Shadow.”

After a brief explanation, Eanru took a step to the side. As he did, a woman wearing a loose, light brown robe appeared behind him. It seemed that she’d been standing there the whole time. Confirming what Eanru said, her appearance matched the description of the hero from Thoria. Seeing this, Jillbert spoke up playfully.

“That damn Crimson Pain, doing this kinda crap behind the scenes... Did you not hear about it, Clara?”

“I was told of it just before we left the Empire.”

It seemed Jillbert was a little irked about not being told beforehand. Tossing another glance at Clarissa, she jumped off the box and took a look at the fourth hero’s face.

“Disregarding their actual intent, and bringing them in anyway... So, what’s up with this one?”

Jillbert was asking whether she came along willingly, and Eanru gave a brief reply.

“This woman refused, so it seems she had her consciousness stolen.”

“I see. You’re quite unfortunate, aren’t you?”

Jillbert looked at Thoria’s hero with pity. However, because the hero’s actions were all under control, she remained completely silent. Sensing that it was meaningless to try and talk to her, Jillbert let out a dissatisfied idle complaint.

“But you know, if we’re gonna be doing stuff like this, I’d prefer to be kept on the up and up. We just happened to have two heroes together back in the Empire, see? It would’ve been faster to do something about them first... But I guess there was the risk of making more powerful enemies other than just the two heroes...”

“But in the end, it all worked out, didn’t it? I hear the man who defeated Romeon is a very close friend of Astel’s hero. If the hero summoned from another world and that man were dutifully bound together, we would probably end up coming into conflict with that man. Personally, that would be exactly what I want, though.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

Jillbert averted her gaze as she apathetically agreed with Eanru. But he did at least have a point. Of course, this was not about wanting to face off against the three of them. Both Clarissa and Jillbert thought that following their strategy in the Empire would have become quite difficult if Suimei decided to help Reiji out. Naturally, they wanted to avoid coming into conflict with the many powers gathering around the heroes in the Empire at the time.

“Well, even without telling you two, it seems like you’ll make a move anyways.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“I’m saying you’re quite skilled. If it was such a trifling matter, you two would accomplish it with ease, right?”

“Well, now that you mention it, I cannot deny the possibility.”

Clarissa also agreed with Eanru there. Securing the heroes would be a small sacrifice towards a great cause. So if they could, they would rather do it neatly and inconspicuously. Eanru then spoke up like he suddenly remembered something.

“There’s also one more report from the Lonely Shadow. Astel’s hero departed for the self-governed state.”

Jillbert raised a flabbergasted voice.

“What?! Wasn’t that hero supposed to stay put in the Empire?”

“Supposed to, yes. But it seems he’s on the move. It looks like something that we couldn’t have predicted.”

“Is that really okay?”

Jillbert was grimacing, but Clarissa looked unfazed.

“In the grand scheme of things, it likely will not be a problem. At this level, I believe it is well within the margin for error.”

“Or is it that, Jillbert? Do you not believe in that man?”

With Eanru poking fun at her, Jillbert looked back at him

uncomfortably.

“That’s not what I mean...”

“That man finds it troubling to explain things to others. His mind works on a completely different level than our thoughtless selves. No, it may be better to say in an entirely different dimension.”

“I get it. You don’t have to explain that to me after all this time.”

“Very well. So, Clarissa, I’ll leave this woman to you.”

“Eanru, where are you headed now?”

“Next is the Alliance’s hero. And I need to go get ready.”

Leaving behind Thoria’s hero, Eanru left the vacant lot in the blacksmithing district.



Beyond the mountains that bordered human territory, even further north than the precipice to the north that stood so tall it threatened to pierce the heavens... Beyond it all in the rugged polar regions, there was a castle that could not possibly have been built by human hands.

It was enormous and had a majestic appearance. It was made with care and was crafted with detail that was nothing short of otherworldly. Something thick surrounded the area around the structure as it wriggled and writhed. This was presently the residence of the Demon Lord—the castle that served as Nakshatra’s main headquarters.

Within a certain room of the Demon Lord’s castle, crowded around a single square table, several living beings made of heterogeneous parts shaped like humans were holding a meeting. At the head of the table, looking down at all those gathered there, was what looked like a young girl wearing pompous clothing. She had black hair and dark brown skin. Standing just behind her was a man with golden forelocks hanging over his face. And then around the table in order: There was a man with long white hair, red eyes, and a slender frame. A blossoming young woman with jet black bat-like wings growing from her back. Perhaps unable to sit in a chair, there was an object like a lump of flesh large enough to monopolize the entire width of the table with arms and legs sprouting out of it. And seated opposite of it was a mass of darkness clad in a robe in the

shape of a tall human figure.

At last, the black-haired young girl sitting at the head of the table opened her mouth with an arrogant tone.

“It seems Mauhario was defeated, Vuishta?”

Vuishta was the dark mass wearing a robe seated opposite of the lump of flesh. Though his form looked insubstantial, he turned the portion of darkness where his face should be towards the girl and answered.

“Indeed. It is exactly as you’ve heard, Nakshatra-sama. Mauhario-dono died in action in the recent fight against the Alliance’s hero. Only my own and Moolah-dono’s armies remain within Alliance territory.”

It was a young man’s voice that came from within the robe. Said voice reported their defeat to the young girl, Nakshatra, but what followed that was a fearless tone that gave no indication he felt anything for his fallen companion.

“However, please be completely at ease, Your Majesty. I have already arrived at a method of defeating the Alliance’s hero. Soon, thanks to my plan, I will definitely be able to deliver the head of that hero to you.”

“We see. If you have a plan, then it is fine. We will leave that matter to Moolah and you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Perhaps intending to bow down to Nakshatra, the upper portion of the robe leaned forward. Because confidence could be heard in Vuishta’s voice, a doubtful voice rang in the air suspecting he was overestimating himself.

“But will it really go that well, I wonder?”

“...Lishbaum-dono, what do you mean by that?”

Vuishta turned towards the man standing behind Nakshatra, Lishbaum. Lishbaum gave a swift reply.

“I was just thinking of the case of His Excellency Rajas—a cautionary tale, if you will. In the current situation where there are four heroes, we do not know where we will have the carpet pulled out from underneath us.”

“I am absolutely sure of my plan. Using Moolah-dono’s large army as a diversion, we will attract their main forces and lure in the hero and her companions when they split off, then annihilate them.”

“But will the hero really get caught in that scheme so easily?”

The one who asked this was the lump of flesh. After it asked about the credibility of his plan in a grating voice, Vuishta fired back with astounding self-confidence.

“The hero and the soldiers of the Alliance are likely so happy from annihilating one of our armies that they cannot keep their feet on the ground. I am 100 percent sure they will fall for my trick.”

“I see. Do you mean to say that while the enemy is making merry, you will make use of that momentum?”

“That is exactly what I am saying, Lishbaum-dono.”

After Vuishta confirmed his intentions, the white-haired man with red eyes, Ilzarl, spoke with contempt.

“To use the dead Mauhario... Wait, Vuishta, you bastard. Did you use Mauhario as bait?”

Hearing those words that were meant to criticize him, Vuishta leaked out a joyous stifled laughter like his plan was being praised.

“Do not be absurd. All I did was relay Mauhario-dono’s desire to fight the hero in personal combat over to Moolah-dono.”

“I see. So that’s how that damn Mauhario ended up being used as a sacrificial lamb.”

“But he got his wish, after all. I am sure he was satisfied to fulfill the role.”

“I bet.”

Ilzarl replied in a flat tone. On the other hand, listening to their exchange, Nakshatra looked at Ilzarl with a cold gaze.

“Oho? Ilzarl, it couldn’t be... Do you have a complaint about Mauhario’s fate?”

“Me, Your Majesty? Impossible. Mauhario lost because he was weak. There is nothing more than that. Just what were you trying to learn with that question?”

“Hmph, then it is fine. We were just a little flustered. You may have been carried away by your damned emotions.”

“Simply impossible.”

Ilzarl snorted like he wasn’t amused at all. While the master and servant were having such a meaningless conversation, the woman with bat wings growing out of her back looked at Vuishta doubtfully.

“I understand what you’re planning Vuishta, but in the end, how are you planning to defeat the Alliance’s hero?”

“Are you belittling my power, Latora?”

“The Alliance’s hero is a woman, isn’t she? If it were me, I

could do something amusing, like... Let's see, was it in Noshias? Just like the little cutie from there. Mmm! Ahahaha..."

Latora laughed with a lewd, twisted smile on her lips. Meanwhile, perhaps reacting to what she was talking about, the lump of flesh opposite of Vuishta's spat back at her with a grating voice.

"The Shrine Maiden of Spirits? It would have been fine to kill her right away."

"But that's no fun, is it? Aaah, Rajas was so openminded about things like this. He too believed an enemy should be thoroughly broken before being defeated."

Latora sounded disappointed. The lump of flesh sank into silence and had nothing further to say to her. Cutting in to their conversation, Vuishta turned to Latora.

"There will be no problem. The hero's attacks will not work on me. Hehehe, not on me who has stolen Lishbaum-dono's technique."

Perhaps because that laughing voice rubbed it the wrong way, or perhaps it was the way Vuishta was speaking, the lump of flesh gave its candid advice.

"You sure bark loudly about a technique you're supposedly borrowing."

"It is indeed borrowed, but I have sublimated the technique and succeeded in making it something powerful. As such, is it now not my own technique?"

"Hmph."

Finding his words impudent, the lump of flesh let out a noise like it was snorting and sent out a metal shard flying from its body. But Vuishta took no action to dodge it. It looked like the shard struck him, but it kept going and flew out the other side of his robe.

"Hehehe..."

Ignoring Vuishta, who was giggling creepily, the lump of flesh turned to Lishbaum.

"Lishbaum, are you alright with this?"

"I do not particularly mind. If it is helpful for His Excellency, then it is just as I desire."

Lishbaum bowed to Vuishta. His expression was hidden by his forelocks, but he seemed to be pleased. Vuishta's creepy laughter only grew stronger as he saw this. Eventually, Vuishta decided to bring an end to this conversation, and turned to Lishbaum.

“That is everything about my plan, Lishbaum-dono. Are you more convinced of it now?”

“All is as you will it, Your Excellency. I thank you deeply for the compassion of putting to rest my needless anxieties. If you would please, Your Majesty...”

“We are done with this topic, are we not? Now go, Vuishta.”

Hearing Nakshatra’s command, Vuishta bowed down deeply as he stepped back and vanished into the darkness. Nakshatra then moved on to the next topic of conversation.

“Now then, we will give you bastards orders from here on out. Latora, Grallajearus, you two will link up with Striga. And was it called Nelferia? You will open a path up to there. Vuishta and Moolah’s armies are in the Alliance, so getting that far should be a simple matter.”

“Yay! The summoned hero of the country on the way there was a woman, right? I’m looking forward to it. Just how should I torment this one, I wonder...”

“All is as you will, Your Majesty. Please look forward to a favorable report.”

One replied with their canines showing and a delightful voice, while the other replied quietly in a grating tone. Latora and Grallajearus excused themselves from the table and vanished into the darkness. There was now only one demon left who had yet to receive any orders, and he raised his voice suspiciously.

“Hey, Nakshatra, what about me?”

Though Ilzarl questioned her skeptically, Lishbaum was the one to answer him.

“My apologies, Your Excellency Ilzarl. You will be handling another matter.”

“You’re planning to have me work independently to fulfill your damn scheme?”

“Yes. Your Excellency, from here, I would like you to head to the self-governed state and retrieve the weapon left behind by a previous hero.”

“A weapon? Isn’t it fine to leave something like that alone? The ones who received divine protection from the Goddess are one thing, but whatever things they wielded in a fight aren’t really a threat.”

“Ilzarl. This is Lishbaum’s request, and it has our authorization.”

Hearing Nakshatra's words, Ilzarl's eyebrow twitched. He then slowly turned to Lishbaum.

"...It's an unusual request. Is it that much of a threat?"

"It is an object called a Sacrament. Its main purpose is for something else entirely, but it is possible that it holds the potential for a human to use it to directly oppose our god, Zekaraia."

"Oh? Now that is interesting. Fine then. I will go along with your damn scheme."

"My humble thanks."

Lishbaum bowed respectfully. However, Ilzarl could sense that there was no feeling behind his words and that he was simply being flattered as he let out a snort. And then, as he was on his way out of the room, he stopped walking.

"Your Excellency?"

"Lishbaum, I just remembered that I had one thing I wanted to ask you."

"What could that be?"

"What kind of person defeated Rajas?"

When Lishbaum heard this question, a faint smile floated up on his face.

"It is said among the humans that the hero from Astel defeated him, right?"

"But it is untrue."

"Why do you think so?"

"Intuition."

"You jest."

Lishbaum replied with what could easily be described as a non-answer while still maintaining his smile. Ilzarl then continued speaking while oozing out a serious aura.

"...For someone like Rajas who received so much of Zekaraia's divine protection, there's no way he would lose to a hero who was just summoned and had yet to become familiar with the Goddess's power."

"If it was someone who already possessed significant power, then I do not think it would be impossible."

"There's no way."

"How can you declare that?"

"From experience. From the heroes who fought against Zekaraia's will up until now, it takes a certain amount of time before they can fight on the level of you bastards, after all."

“So that’s what was strange about His Excellency Rajas being defeated by a hero?”

“That’s right. No matter how you look at it, it was too soon.”

“But even so, there’s no point in asking me... Oh dear, how troublesome.”

So he said, but Lishbaum did not actually look troubled at all. Even though there was an existence out there that was capable of defeating a powerful demon general, his appearance did not give off a single hint that he considered it a dangerous situation. It was rather like he was wearing a clown’s mask as he talked.

“You sure are composed. As I expected, you know who defeated Rajas, don’t you?”

“Incorrect. It is currently under investigation.”

“With that kind of faint smirk? You’re the one who should be keeping your jokes in check.”

Lishbaum’s sycophantic attitude still did not break, and Ilzarl glared at him coldly. Seeing that he had no intention of averting his gaze, Lishbaum let out a sigh like he was giving in, and peeled back his mask. As he did, the temperature in the room dropped. As the room became cold enough to freeze anything and everything within, a sound like something was cracking began to fill the air. In the brief moment when this unusual phenomenon happened, an atmosphere spread around the room—one dark enough to make even a demon uneasy.

What was being spread in the atmosphere of that room in the Demon Lord’s castle was none other than the psychic cold fired off by magicians.

“Pardon me, Your Excellency, but is it not reasonable that the one who defeated His Excellency Rajas was the hero after all? Based on what Your Excellency said before, even if it was someone who possessed a substantial amount of power beforehand, His Excellency Rajas would still be impossible to defeat. Even at the hands of a hero with the Goddess’s blessing.”

“Therefore... Oho, it certainly would imply that, wouldn’t it?”

“That is correct, Your Excellency. It is a bit of an inconsistency.”

“...Then I withdraw my earlier statement. Even without the Goddess’ power, there are means to defeat him.”

Those were the words Lishbaum wanted to hear. He flashed an ominous smile that Ilzarl had never seen before, and gave him the

reply he wanted.

“The name of the one who defeated His Excellency Rajas is Yakagi Suimei. He is a modern magician affiliated with the Magician’s Society revived by the magician king Nestahaim. He’s classified as a high-ranking magician. Compared to other magicians, the magicka systems that he can use cover a fairly wide range. And among those, he can use Abracadra, which can push back divinity of the same level as Zekaraia into the valley between worlds; the Bless Blade which can kill beasts that call forth the apocalypse in a single slash; the golden Magnale that has endured the roar of a red dragon; and Enth Astrarle, which blew away said dragon without a trace. With these four great magickas of astounding power, he has defeated numerous magicians. And the magicka that defeated His Excellency Rajas was without a doubt holy lightning with the power of a sacred guardian angel. Against us, that would be most effective.”

“...You bastard.”

“Along the way, do be careful if you happen to run into him. I’m sure Your Excellency stands a good chance against him, but that man is the type to get up over and over again so long as his dreams are not shattered. Unless the merciless reality that he can never return from is made apparent to him, he will be rather hard to deal with.”

Within those words, Lishbaum fired the feelings he recalled thinking of his extraordinary destiny. It was not just resentment, and not just anger. It was not quite admiration, but there was some joy. After his voice that was filled with a flood of emotions fell silent, the remaining demon general vanished into the darkness and melted away.

Chapter 3: On the Evening of the New Moon

As the stars glistened in the heavens above, a faint blue light traced an empty circle in the air. It was like a black lacquer plate was suspended in the sky.

“On the night of a new moon, never compete against a swordsman.”

As a magician, Suimei’s father had had his share of run-ins with all manner of sword masters. And on this night, Suimei was reminded of a warning his father had told him to never forget. Swords were excellent reflectors of moonlight. In direct moonlight, it was almost like they were aglow with the killing intent of the wielder. At just the right moment, you could literally see the arc the blade traced in the air as it came in for the finishing blow. Needless to say, it was a different story on the night of the new moon. Neither artificial light nor the light given off by the glow of mana revealed the flicker of a sword quite the same way. And so, without the natural light of the moon, a master swordsman’s blade was practically invisible at night.

And in a world like this where the nights were especially dark, it was easy enough to predict how any such fight would go down. Hoping that his second encounter with Hatsumi wouldn’t come to that, Suimei looked up at the deep, dark sky with a worried expression. For you see, on this moonless evening, Suimei was planning to sneak into the palace once more.

Descending from the tall spiked wall, he softly landed in a hedge inside the palace grounds. After looking around, he came to realize the place was actually quite enormous. There was the main building, three separate annexes with gardens, the barracks for the guards, and a chapel separated by some woods. Taking a tour of the entire place very well may be an all-day affair.

Things would have been a little easier if he’d known where he was going, but his destination was different from his last visit. He also had to worry about whether or not Hatsumi would be alone

now. After last time, she would likely be a lot more vigilant. It was easily possible she had an escort with her, but Suimei would just have to find out for himself.

“Welp, Lilia said she goes out to a watering hole alone at night...”

If that was true, things shouldn’t be all that difficult. But the grand palace of Miazen was the height of luxury—it had two watering holes. And Suimei would have to investigate both.

While thinking things over, Suimei hid himself behind a tree. It wasn’t really necessary considering he was already using *magicka* to disguise his presence, but he could hardly help it. It was human nature to carry oneself according to the mood of the situation.

There were soldiers posted sporadically around the well where a maid was currently drawing water. It seemed this location was frequented by all sorts of people, so Suimei quickly discounted it. If Hatsumi went out to be alone, it was hard to imagine she’d come to such a popular place to do it. However...

“A watering hole, huh? Just what is she coming out to a place like this for anyway?”

The first thing that came to mind was getting a drink, naturally. But surely there would be servants waiting on her every need as long as she was staying in the castle. As Suimei had just seen, drawing water was clearly a maid’s job—not a hero’s. The only other thing he could really think of...

“Using water for sword training... Maybe?”

Suimei wasn’t too familiar with the ways of the blade, but he could think of a couple of different ways water might come in handy while practicing. She might even be using it for something like resistance training. That would also explain why she wanted to be alone. It was natural to seek solitude for training. But that left Suimei with another worry.

“She’ll be armed and ready, so if I’m careless... Even though we’ll finally have a chance to be alone together...”

Not realizing what he said could easily be interpreted the wrong way, Suimei jumped up onto the closest roof. With the help of his flight *magicka*, he landed silently and then ran along the rooftop while scanning the ground below. He moved away from the main complex and headed towards the second watering hole near the chapel, which was reserved strictly for the royal family.

The spring was surrounded by a tall grove of trees, as if to

conceal it from the rest of the palace. It was rather solitary and the patrols in this area were scarce, making it the ideal place to come if someone wanted to be alone. All that was left was for Suimei to find Hatsumi.

“Ah, crap. Looks like they do come out here...”

Just as he jumped down from the rooftop, Suimei spotted a single female guard headed in the same direction. He hurriedly concealed himself and thought about putting her to sleep, but ultimately decided to save his magicka. Surely one patrolling guard wouldn't be an issue in such a large area. But speaking of, Suimei couldn't see anything resembling a spring from where he landed.

“So... it's behind the chapel?”

Suimei muttered to himself as he watched the guard walk off. He then stealthily moved around the building and came upon a stone wall made quite differently from those of the chapel. It seemed to serve as a divider of some sort, but with the side of it wide open, it wasn't exactly doing a good job of keeping anything out.

From just on the other side of the wall, Suimei could hear the splashing sound of water—much more of it and much louder than he'd expected. The noises came at irregular intervals, making it clear there was someone there.

After confirming that nobody else was nearby, Suimei slipped through the gate-like hole in the wall. Just beyond it, there was a large stone well with what looked like a drain in the pavement nearby. There was a bucket suspended from a metal fixture overtop the well, and sitting next to it was...

“...Huh?”

“Huh...?”

Kuchiba Hatsumi, stark naked.

Other than letting out a boneheaded gasp of surprise, Suimei was completely paralyzed. Bewitched, even. Hatsumi's rather un-Japanese golden hair, inherited from her grandfather, was slick with water. Her glowing skin was dripping wet too. The lines of her body drew stunning shapes that Suimei couldn't help but follow with his eyes. Her figure was captivating. Staring at him in return, Hatsumi made an equally dumbfounded exclamation. She sat there frozen, still holding a bucket of water over her shoulder and everything.

Thinking about it logically, this all made perfect sense. Of

course there was a well behind the chapel where people could come to purify their minds and bodies.

Bathing culture was locked to a single region in this world. Anywhere outside of that, people preferred just using a wet sponge to wash themselves. But for someone who was used to the full bathing experience, that just didn't feel right. It was perfectly understandable that they'd want to come out to a well to at least rinse off.

"Um, you know, this is, um..."

Though completely incoherent, Suimei did his best to come up with an excuse. He wanted to make it clear it hadn't been his intention to peep on her. Nevertheless, it seemed that was how Hatsumi had taken it. It looked like she was about to scream.

"You per—"

"W-Wait a sec!"

Knowing anyone who heard her would come running, Suimei made a dash for Hatsumi. After warding off the bucket she threw at him, he grappled her.

"Urgh!"

"W-Wait! Please quiet down! I'm begging you!"

Suimei skillfully slipped around behind her and grabbed her. To prevent her from raising her voice, he covered her mouth with his right hand. The suddenness of it all made them lose their balance, and they both fell backward onto their butts. But Suimei wasn't at all concerned about that. No, with a guard still patrolling the area, his full attention was on trying to keep a panicked woman from screaming bloody murder in the middle of the night.

As soon as that happened, it would be all over. The first guard would show up, then another and another until the situation devolved into a repeat of last time. It would completely squander his only real chance to talk to Hatsumi, so Suimei wanted to avoid it no matter what. Hatsumi, however, was naturally none too happy about the situation. She was squirming as best she could to try and escape his grasp. Suimei tightened his grip around her with his left arm. He was focusing his magic on trying to form a barrier, so all he had to hold Hatsumi back with was his own strength.

"Mm! Mmmph!"

"Like I've been saying, just spare me the violence..."

"Mmm— Hom!"

"Ow! Shit, just a little more..."

Suimei did his best to frantically invoke his magicka. He'd been careless—it was what he should have just done in the first place. But there was no point in kicking himself over it now. He had to focus on deploying the Phantom Road immediately.

Forming the barrier took most of Suimei's concentration. When it was finally completed, Hatsumi seemed to have calmed down a bit. She'd stopped struggling, at least. And with the barrier now isolating them from the outside world, Suimei let out a sigh of relief as he let go of Hatsumi's mouth.

"Sorry 'bout that. I had no..."

"You had no choice?! Pervert!"

Suimei was still holding her, but Hatsumi didn't hesitate to reproach him with the same vigor she'd just used to bite him.

"S-Say what you will, but I had no idea you were out here like *this*..."

"Enough! Now let me go! Just how long are you planning on grabbing my breast, you idiot?!"

"What—?"

Hearing those words, Suimei finally realized just what kind of position he was in. He'd been so utterly focused on grabbing her that he failed to notice that his left hand had taken a firm hold of her breast. It took him a few seconds to take stock of the situation. Then a few more to put his thoughts in order. Realizing that he was taking way too long to react, Suimei turned completely red. He quickly let go and jumped back. Now that he thought about it, he thought he'd grabbed something soft when he tightened his grip on her...

"S-S-S-Sorry!"

"I bet you are, you pervert! First you sneak into my room in the middle of the night, and now you're sneaking up on me while I'm bathing so you can grope me! If that isn't the behavior of a total creep, I don't know what is!"

"Yikes!" Suimei replied in a hysterical voice. "I-I-I don't have any argument there..."

In a most uncharacteristic fashion, he meekly got on his hands and knees to apologize. Hatsumi, meanwhile, was finding it hard to take a stance while keeping herself covered. With just her arms and hands, she was doing her best to make herself decent, though it wasn't quite working out. She had one arm over her chest, but didn't seem to notice the two flashes of pink slipping out from

under it. Seeing her cheeks bashfully turn bright red as she glared at him, Suimei finally realized what he could do.

“U-Um, please take these...”

Suimei humbly went to get her clothes that were hanging nearby and handed them to her. He kept his gaze cast downward to keep himself from inadvertently looking at anything, but just to be on the safe side, he kept his eyes squeezed shut too. Hatsumi took her clothes from him, but remained on guard.

When he could no longer hear the sound of rustling clothing, Suimei finally lifted his head. At worst, he might be cut down on the spot, but it didn't seem like she had her sword at hand. Maybe it was actually a good thing he'd stumbled upon her while she was bathing. When he looked up at Hatsumi, she was looking around dubiously.

“I screamed quite a bit... Is no one coming?”

“This area has been isolated via magicka now. You can scream all you want, but no one's going to hear you.”

“In other words, you think you've caught me?”

Hatsumi gave Suimei a look sharper than any knife. Even her tone was considerably pointed. Suimei raised both his hands in the air as if to plead his innocence.

“I mean, it's not like I have any intention of harming you...”

“I think you've already done enough harm already.”

“I'm sorry. I apologize. Please forgive me. That part wasn't on purpose.”

Suimei prostrated himself and apologized in as many ways as he could think of. Seeing him behave so differently than the last time he'd infiltrated the palace, Hatsumi was understandably taken aback and let out a tremendous sigh.

“...So? Why are you here?”

“Like I said last time, I came to talk.”

“About us being childhood friends?”

“That's right.”

Suimei nodded with a solemn expression, but Hatsumi was unfazed.

“I believe I denied that the last time, didn't I? How is it that a childhood friend from another world is coming to visit me, hmm?”

“I was also summoned to this world. There's no other possibility except for that, right?”

“What are the odds...? In other words, are you also a hero?”

“No, I got caught up in Reiji’s... Another friend of mine was summoned, and I got dragged along with him. Did you hear about an accident happening during the summoning ritual in the kingdom of Astel?”

“Now that you mention it, that does ring a bell...”

“And that’s why I’m here right now.”

Suimei sounded like he was rather fed up with being a victim of the whims of fate, but Hatsumi continued to look at him with doubtful eyes. Realizing he still wasn’t getting through to her, he grimaced.

“Then what do I have to tell you for you to believe me? Your parents’ names? Your specialties? Your hobbies? The things you like...? If none of that works, I can also talk about your deepest, darkest secrets or your embarrassing past.”

“My what?! How do you even know my deepest, darkest secrets?!”

“We’ve been hanging out since we were just little brats, after all. We’re cousins who lived next door to each other, you know.”

“What? Cousins...? Is that true?”

Suimei nodded back at her apparent surprise over them being family. It seemed that was enough to begin to crumble her otherwise stalwart wall of doubt, though her expression was still slightly uneasy.

“So you still don’t believe me?”

“...Do you think I can really just believe anything anyone says?”

“Well, that’s fair...”

Hatsumi was a hero with amnesia, which put her in a precarious position. Any number of people could be waiting in the wings to take advantage of her. It was perfectly understandable that she kept her guard up, and that included regarding other people and what they told her with a healthy amount of skepticism. Without knowing who she could or couldn’t trust, she’d had it rough.

Suimei slumped his shoulders and scratched his head in frustration. If words couldn’t convince her, he had no other way to prove what he was claiming was true. All he could do was pray that her memory returned. While pondering the situation, Suimei folded his arms and let out a groan. Hatsumi stared at him fixedly, and before long, spoke up in a somehow resigned voice.

“...Got it. I’ll believe you. If you were really planning on taking

me down, you wouldn't go about it in such a roundabout way."

"Really?"

"It doesn't seem like you mean me any harm, at least. Besides, you know things about me that I haven't told anyone—and then some. And... one more thing. Could you say my full name?"

"Kuchiba Hatsumi."

"And your name is?"

"It's Yakagi Suimei?"

"Yakagi... Suimei..."

"What's up?"

Suimei looked at Hatsumi with a puzzled expression as she continued to mutter his name like something about it bothered her.

"...It's reversed."

"Huh?"

"When you say it, it's reversed. When the people of this world say my name, they also seem to be saying it in a way that's easier to pronounce for them. But your name sounds natural to me.

Moreover, I can see that what you're saying actually matches the movement of your mouth. It's also rather self-evident that we're the same race. Thinking about it rationally, there's a lot more working in your favor than against it." Hatsumi paused there a moment before continuing. "What I was suspicious of last time was that you seemed to know too much... which is why I couldn't believe it right away. You also caught me off guard sneaking in like that."

That was understandable. Who would be readily trusting of a trespasser? However, now that they'd gotten past that, Suimei let out a sigh of relief. Now he could finally talk to her about what he'd wanted to in the first place. But Hatsumi once more turned a stern gaze on him.

"That being said, it's not like I plan on letting my guard down around you."

"Huh?"

"That's right."

"Wh-Wha?! Are you saying you believe me?!"

"That's right—with reservation. Even if you're an acquaintance of mine and even if you're showing me your favor, I still don't know whether or not you're trustworthy, you see."

Whether they were acquaintances, friends, or cousins, Hatsumi still had no way of knowing if Suimei could really be trusted. It was perfectly reasonable that she'd remain wary. Accordingly, she

questioned him in a somewhat aggressive tone.

“So? Why did you do something reckless like infiltrate the palace? Wasn’t there another way to visit me?”

“That again, huh? Apparently it’s no simple matter to arrange a meeting with the hero. I couldn’t even do it using the guild master at the Twilight Pavilion as an intermediary.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. It seems the royal family prohibits it.”

Watching Suimei roll his eyes and shrug his shoulders, Hatsumi knit her brow as if she still found all this dubious.

“The king and the others are all good people.”

“I don’t know anything about that, but...”

Suimei made a pensive face, hesitant to continue. He was wondering whether or not he should really speak his mind here. In truth, it seemed like the royal family of Miazen was using Hatsumi. He didn’t have any definitive proof of it, but at the very least, they were trying to shield her from something. So Suimei was unsure if he should really say anything about it.

“It’s not like I don’t have a clue. I also feel like they’re using me somewhat.”

But it seemed Hatsumi read his mind from the subtleties of his expression. He may have been hesitant to bring it up, but she certainly wasn’t.

“But it could be said that the hero summoning itself is the most prime example of that. And by that logic, it’s a slippery slope. There’d be no end to it.”

“That’s true... But, well, that’s why I’m here. That’s why I had to resort to sneaking in.”

After Suimei plainly stated his reasons, Hatsumi had a follow-up question for him.

“...Hey, were you worried about me?”

Suimei looked at her as though the answer were only obvious.

“Well, yeah. We’re family.”

“Family...”

Even if they were related by blood, cousins weren’t always close. But for Suimei who had no immediate family, the cousin he’d grown up with was the next best thing. Whenever he was in Japan, Hatsumi’s parents would always check in on him and fret about whether he was eating properly. Hatsumi would even cook for him sometimes. They were all Suimei really had of a family anymore,

and that bond kept him especially close with Hatsumi. He certainly wasn't about to leave her alone. But he'd thrown the word "family" around so casually that Hatsumi looked a little stunned. She stood there blinking repeatedly.

"What is it?" Suimei asked.

"N-Nothing! It's nothing!" she said, shyly turning away.

After a few moments, when her embarrassment seemed to subside, she turned back to Suimei and spoke up in a timid voice.

"You said we're cousins... but do I have other family?"

"Yeah. Your father is Instructor Kiyoshiro. Your mother is Yukio-san. And you have a little brother named Haseto. If you suddenly disappeared, I'm sure they're all worried."

"They... They must be, huh?"

Hearing that she had family waiting for her in another world was, understandably, hard to bear. Without knowing that there was anyone looking for her, she hadn't had much to worry about in that regard. But now it all hit her at once. Seeing her troubled expression, Suimei held out his hand.

"Hatsumi, come with me."

"With you?"

"That's right. I'm currently looking for a way to return to our world. That's why I came to Miazen in the first place... And if you come with me, you can go home the moment I figure it out. That's why..."

That's why he wanted her to come—that's what he was trying to say. But Hatsumi didn't take him up on the offer. As if she was turning her back on his kindness, she awkwardly averted her gaze.

"But... I have to fight the demons..."

"There's no reason why you have to fight them, right? They arbitrarily summoned you against your will and told you to fight. You have no obligation to help them."

"..."

That wasn't just true for Hatsumi, but for all the heroes summoned to this world. Not one of them actually had any obligation to fight the demons. For Hatsumi—who had amnesia and had already actually fought the demons once—it was doubly true. She owed these people nothing. Suimei was still worried someone might be trying to brainwash her. But if she was saying this of her own free will, then...

"Could it be... you feel like you can't turn your back on the

comrades you've fought together with until now?"

"That's part of it... But this is my fight; I can't just walk away partway through it."

"Your fight? What do you mean?"

"Like you said, I don't have any memories—I don't have any reason to fight. And that's how it was at first. I kept myself shut away in my room. But when I heard the demons were attacking, after hearing someone begging for their people to be saved, I felt like it was something I had to do."

Hatsumi's articulate answer shut Suimei up rather quickly. It was rather similar to what Reiji had once said to him.

"And so I took up arms with the people of the Alliance, Selphy, and the others, and we pushed the demons back. Everyone was happy. Not because I fought, but because I saved them and their families. That's why..."

That's why she couldn't just leave them now. She felt like she'd started this fight, and dropping it as soon as she heard she might be able to return home would be nothing short of selfish.

And those words came flooding out of Hatsumi's mouth like this was the first chance she'd gotten to really speak her mind on the matter. But how she felt was understandable. Her conscience was guiding her—or holding her back, as Suimei saw it. In the end, this wasn't her fight. She'd just been dragged into the people's cause. And just as Suimei was about to admonish her for that, she suddenly changed the topic.

"Hey, um... I don't know when it was, but was there a funeral? You were the chief mourner. I think you lost someone important to you..."

"A funeral? Three years ago... was my father's funeral. The chief mourner was supposed to be Instructor Kiyoshiro, but since I was the closest blood relative, I ended up doing it."

Suimei was wondering whether she'd remembered something. But Hatsumi let out a despondent sigh, like she'd just heard bad news.

"I thought so..."

"But how do you know about that? Don't you have amnesia?"

"I had a vision—a flashback. Everything was hazy and it only lasted for a moment, though."

As Suimei was pondering how that might have actually happened, she continued explaining.

"But after the funeral, I saw you. You said that you had to keep going forward. That you had to go save them..."

"I did?" Suimei reflexively asked.

Thinking back on it, he didn't remember saying anything like that.

"You don't know...? I see. You probably don't remember because you were half asleep. It struck me as a little strange too, but at the time, it really felt like you had something you had to do no matter what. That's why I thought it must have been some sort of dream of yours."

Those were busy, dark days for Suimei. After settling all his late father's worldly business, he had to uphold the last promise he'd made with him—his resolution to continue to walk the path of a magician. It wasn't all that strange that he'd accidentally let mention of it slip his lips.

"When Gaius barged into the palace asking for reinforcements, that memory came back to me. That's why I started fighting. The boy in my memories pressed onward without letting anything hold him back. So I couldn't just stand by and do nothing... Though I'm a little peeved to find out that boy was you."

Hatsumi trailed off a bit and added those last few words under her breath. That part didn't sit well with Suimei, but that wasn't why he was rubbing his forehead. He was distraught over his own helplessness. He'd never imagined his own words would be part of the reason she was fighting. It was ironic, really. Because of something he'd said in the past, she wouldn't listen to him now. Realizing Suimei looked like he was at his wits' end, Hatsumi spoke up again.

"It's not like I'm saying it's your fault..."

"I know. Even if you didn't have amnesia, you might have made the same choice. I won't say who's really to blame."

But even with that blunt declaration, Suimei was unable to dispel his own guilt. If Hatsumi had come to this world with her memories, it was indeed plenty likely she'd still be fighting the demons. The sword style she practiced was meant for nothing other than fighting evil, after all. Slowly coming to terms with all this, Suimei quietly asked her one more time.

"So you're going to stay and fight here?"

"Yes. I started this, so I'm going to finish it."

"I see..."

Suimei could only barely get out those words. He was nearly choked up with worry. Fighting the demons was no lighthearted undertaking. All manner of hardships would lie ahead of her. And that included her dealings with other people. As long as she held the position of a hero, there would be things happening behind the curtain that she had no control over. On top of that, she still didn't have her memories back. That would only heap anxiety on top of everything else. However...

"Got it."

Suimei stood up to leave. Just because he was worried didn't mean he had any right to tell her she was wrong. Even if he broke down and took her by force, he wouldn't be satisfied. It wasn't fair to make her abandon her goals just so he could accomplish his own. He knew what it was like to have something you couldn't give up on.

"I'd like to go along with you, but I have to find the spell to return us to our world. When I do, I'll come back."

"Okay."

"I'll be staying in town at the Twilight Pavilion's boarding house for a while. If you need anything, don't hesitate to come and ask. Though you may be reluctant to meet with me..."

With those gentle words, Suimei clapped his hands together as though he'd suddenly remembered something.

"That's right!"

"What?"

"The next time you meet whoever's in charge around here, deliver a message for me: 'If you're planning to continue messing with me despite being the hero's friend, my priorities will change. Next time, whoever you send at me—be it ten or twenty thousand men—better come prepared to be annihilated.'"

After Suimei informed her of this in a slightly joking tone, he took his leave.



It was now the day after Suimei infiltrated the palace for the second time. Kuchiba Hatsumi was seated before the king in a circular gazebo in a corner of the palatial royal garden. At the king's side was Crown Prince Weitzer, and filling the gazebo were the various cabinet ministers and generals of Miazen. Hatsumi's

other companions, Gaius and Selphy, were also in attendance.

After judging that the king had finished with his government affairs, Hatsumi had requested an unofficial audience with him. The royal family was very mindful of Hatsumi's circumstances, and ordinarily put up the front of all business with the hero being official, so it was decided that this meeting in particular would be held outside of the more formal audience chamber.

Sitting across from Hatsumi at a marble table, the king of Miazen gave her a gentle smile. It was likely his way of telling her she could relax here. The king of Miazen was a mild man, quite unlike his son, Weitzer. He was the very picture of the kind king from any fairytale. He was strict when he needed to be, but always took his people into consideration, and was beloved by all. Once everyone was in place and all the preparations were settled, the king addressed Hatsumi.

"Now, Hero-dono, what was it that you wished to speak of so earnestly with me?"

"You see, sire, it concerns the plans we made for how to handle the demons from here, as well as an unrelated report."

Without being particularly humble, Hatsumi replied politely and elegantly. The king spoke back to her in a slightly joking manner.

"Oho, so you discussed that sort of thing already, have you? It is admirable of you to be thinking of the demon subjugation during your time of rest, but I should have liked to join the panel."

"My apologies. You are a busy man, Your Majesty, so though it may be presumptuous, we decided to talk amongst ourselves."

"I see, I see. My apologies for causing you concern, but you're as modest as ever, Hero-dono. Without being proud, you're quite dignified. I am proud of you as the king of the country that has you as its hero."

The king laughed with a broad smile. It was the face of a king who loved the people, though Hatsumi had her doubts about whether it was a good or a bad thing to shower praise on people at every opportunity. She took a casual glimpse in Gaius's direction, and perhaps because he found the king's overly loose tone to be tedious or perhaps because he didn't enjoy the flattery, his lips were drawn in a tight frown. The king eventually moved the conversation along, still smiling.

"Now then, please share with me the contents of your

discussion.”

“From now on, to the best of my ability, I was thinking of taking up the plans originally laid out for the hero. Of course, this will only be after the remaining demons in the northern parts of the Alliance are eradicated. But once that is handled, I was thinking of meeting up with the other heroes.”

That was what Selphy had once told her the hero was meant to do. That way, when the demon attacks grew fierce, the heroes would be able to band together and act as one where their help was needed most. With the demon invasion currently moving at the slow crawl that it was, most of the other heroes were still travelling around to inspire the citizens and increase morale. That was an important part of a hero’s job too, but Hatsumi was thinking it was about time that they started moving towards the fight.

“Hmm, yes... You certainly have a point, though I must say I think it’s a little premature to be considering this. I’m sure you’ve heard tales of the other heroes, but I do believe it is vital for you to focus on what’s right in front of you without rushing it.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

Despite the king sounding overly optimistic about the future, Hatsumi respectfully bowed her head.

“And, goodness me... Frankly speaking, I cannot bring myself to have such a young girl thrust into war. Hero-dono, do you not also wish to live a peaceful life? If you desire it, you could stay here in the palace hereafter and live your life away from battle altogether.”

“Huh...?”

Hatsumi’s eyes were darting from place to place in a sort of staggered confusion. The king had just implied it was fine for her to ignore her duties as a hero. Considering he was partially responsible for summoning her to this world, it didn’t seem like anything he should be saying. She thought perhaps he was trying to be considerate of her amnesia. She didn’t think it was anything nefarious. No, the king was always smiling far too gently to have ulterior motives. She didn’t want to be distrusting, but... As Hatsumi was processing her feelings deep within her heart, the king spoke once more.

“What do you think? You’ve already defeated a demon general. With that alone, I believe you have already accomplished your duty sufficiently. I do not think anyone would frown upon you withdrawing from battle at this time.”

What he was saying was too good to be true. Hatsumi couldn't agree.

"No. Though I sincerely appreciate the thought, I can't resign myself from this battle."

"I see... Then so be it. Though you must know your battles with the demons will increase exponentially from here on out if you take this path. We will offer you all the support we can, but Hero-dono, do be careful."

After acknowledging Hatsumi's plans, the king looked to Weitzer.

"Weitzer, take care of Hero-dono."

"Understood."

Weitzer lightly bowed his head. Both of them were being overprotective. Judging that concluded this part of the conversation, however, Hatsumi moved on to the next topic.

"As I mentioned before, Your Majesty, there is one more matter I'd like to discuss with you."

"What is it?"

"It concerns the case of the intruder who came into my room the other night."

The smiling king immediately grimaced when he heard those words.

"I can do naught but apologize for that, I'm afraid. I'm expecting to hear good news soon, but that nefarious bandit has yet to be caught. The soldiers are actively patrolling and sweeping the city, but I hear neither hide nor hair of him has been found so far. We'll extend the search to neighboring towns next, so I must ask for your continued patience. We'll devote everything we can to apprehending the criminal. I assure you that your personal security is of our utmost concern."

"No, I didn't mean that, Your Highness. I'd like you to stop fussing over it."

"...What do you mean?"

"He came to visit me again last night."

"What?!" the king gasped, his complexion paling in an instant.

"Wait, seriously?!" Gaius exclaimed.

"That man again?! Just where did he..." Weitzer nearly shouted before trailing off.

Hatsumi's confession was so startling that Gaius and Weitzer both forgot their place and reacted quite loudly. Though she said

nothing, even Selphy looked disturbed.

“There’s no need to worry, everyone. I’m okay.”

Though Hatsumi said there was no cause for concern, the king was unable to shake off his agitation.

“H-Hero-dono... are you truly alright?”

“Yes. If he came to me with ill intent, Your Majesty, then I wouldn’t be standing before you now.”

“That is true, but... Just what were the palace guards doing?”

The king was a bit irked, and was making a deliberately sour expression. This was now the second time the palace had been breached. Any king would be displeased. Seeing the surrounding soldiers trembling, Hatsumi could only feel sorry for them. And then, though belatedly, the king seemed to understand what she was saying.

“So, Hero-dono, do you mean for me to overlook the intrusion?”

“Last night he came to visit me, and we talked. In the end, it does truly seem he is one of my acquaintances.”

“I have also heard that the intruder claimed to be a good friend of yours, but how can that be when you were summoned from a different world?”

“Apparently he was brought here by the summoning in Astel.”

“Hmm... It’s possible, certainly, but a rather extraordinary tale indeed. Is there a reason you believe this man?”

“The movement of his mouth. Even speaking with you as I am now, Your Majesty, I hear the words you use translated into my own language. Thusly, what I hear you say doesn’t match the movement of your lips. But that wasn’t the case with him, which can only mean that we speak the same language.”

“I see. In other words, that bandit... Forgive me, that man. If he truly speaks a language from your world, that certainly does seem to corroborate his story.”

“In addition, he could tell me a great many things about myself. It seems that he knows me quite well.”

“Hmm...”

The king was known for smiling, no matter the situation. But right now, he was making a face like he’d just swallowed something very bitter. It was most unusual for him, but he wasn’t the only one affected by the situation. Weitzer cut into the conversation with a markedly perturbed attitude.

"Is there no mistaking it?"

"Beyond a shadow of a doubt. There's far more reason for me to believe him than not."

Hearing Hatsumi say that, Weitzer looked completely dumbfounded. The king, on the other hand, looked deathly serious.

"Nevertheless, this friend of yours has committed the grave crime of infiltrating the palace. I have no desire to charge a friend of yours with such a crime... but there is nothing that can be done about it."

"He claims he had no choice but to do so. He said that there was no way to arrange an official meeting with me. Is that correct?"

Hatsumi's tone was surprisingly somewhat reproachful. The king winced to hear it, perhaps because he hadn't expected her to bring up such a thing.

"Y-Yes, that was a measure taken for your protection. We believed that unwanted visitors would only be a burden on you without your memories."

The king was clearly agitated, and it only sounded to Hatsumi like he was making excuses. Perhaps this had something to do with what Suimei was trying to say the previous night. As Hatsumi contemplated this internally, she continued to push her point.

"Then might we agree to write off the offense?"

"I understand why you're asking, but I have my duties as king to consider... Allowing the palace to be infiltrated does not sit well with me."

Hatsumi could tell that the king was reluctant to agree with her. But she couldn't stand to see Suimei branded a criminal just for risking his life to come see her. As such, she changed her approach and spoke to the king rather bluntly.

"I understand, Your Majesty. But if that is the case, I have a message for you. Just before he left, he bid me to relay the following words to you: 'If you're planning to continue messing with me, whoever you send at me—be it ten or twenty thousand men—better come prepared to be annihilated.' In this situation where we need to be rallying against the demons, I don't believe you have the leisure to lose your soldiers over such foolishness."

"My..."

At some point, Hatsumi's matter-of-fact words had taken on a more threatening tone. The king hesitated to reply. Suimei's message was quite haughty, but the king knew of the hero's

strength. Even if Suimei didn't have the hero's blessing, if he was from Hatsumi's world, he had to be quite strong. It gave him great pause. Weitzer, however, was incensed.

"Ten or twenty thousand? What a boastful claim..."

Though he hadn't fought him personally, Weitzer had seen Suimei's power for himself. He knew he was strong, certainly, but not indomitably so. He saw Gaius and Selphy defeated at his hands, but they'd both let their guards down. It wasn't like they'd put the full extent of their power to use, though the same thing could be said of Suimei, who was just trying to leave peacefully.

"I don't think it was all boasting, Weitzer," clarified Hatsumi. "The palace guards couldn't even stand against him. Selphy and Gaius, you both recognize him as a formidable foe, no?"

"You bet he is. Even if I underestimated him, I still got taken out in a single blow," Gaius said with a bitter snort.

"He... is indeed formidable. I don't feel like I could ever win against that young man, no matter how many times we fought against him," Selphy answered quietly.

Suimei had dealt quite a blow to both of their self-confidence. It was a unique feeling that only someone who'd actually faced him in combat could understand. And after they weighed in their opinions, Hatsumi turned back to the king, who currently looked rather bewildered.

"And so, to prevent any unnecessary loss, Your Majesty, I don't believe there is any other choice. Will you not reconsider?"

"But you know, Hero-dono..."

Seeing that the king was still pushing back, Hatsumi grew impatient and took on a frank attitude.

"Then let's do this. If you plan on causing him harm, I will take his side."

"Wha?!"

"That man braved great danger just to check on me. It is only proper and just that I do the same to defend him, you see."

"V-Very well... I will comply. As you say, Hero-dono, it is only proper..."

Her intimidating bluff worked perfectly. The king grimaced painfully before continuing.

"So, did he come to Miazen to meet with you, Hero-dono?"

"No, he said that he originally came here to look for a means to return to his own world. It's likely he only realized I was here after

arriving in Miazén.”

“A means to return?”

“Yes. I don’t know the full details, but he said that if I went with him, we would be able to return the moment he found it. From the way he spoke, I believe he may yet actually find a way.”

Hatsumi conveyed the impression she got from their conversation the other day. Magic was outside of her area of expertise, so she had no grasp on his abilities. But based on his confidence, she certainly believed it was something he could pull off. Hearing this, the king revealed a far more anxious expression than before and leaned forward to ask his next question. This seemed to be a matter of grave importance not just to him, but to the entire country.

“Hero-dono, is that really true?! If it is, how did you reply?!”

Sweat was forming on his brow, and his face only continued to tense as he waited for her reply. Everyone else in the gazebo stood there with bated breath. Gaius, however, eventually lost his patience and came stomping over.

“Hey, you’re not gonna say you’re going with him, are you?!”

“No, I’m not. Didn’t I say earlier that I intended to defeat the demons?”

With those words, the frozen atmosphere in the gazebo thawed out instantly. Everyone was relieved to hear her reply.

“Do not scare us like that. It is bad for my heart.”

“Sorry.”

Taking a look at everyone’s faces, Hatsumi apologized for alarming them. After they all calmed down, however, she got the conversation back on track and made her full intentions clear.

“But once the demons are vanquished, I’m thinking of returning to my own world.”

It wasn’t something she’d thought she’d get to do. But if there was a way, it was an opportunity anyone in her shoes would take. Selphy and Gaius both looked deeply unsettled as they stared at Hatsumi. While everyone was at a loss for words, Weitzer spoke up.

“H-Hero-dono, are you seriously...”

“Yes. I’m told that I have a family waiting for me—a place where my memories are.”

“But...”

“Sorry. I feel badly after you’ve all treated me so well, but I can’t stay like this. I’m sure my family is quite worried...”

That's why she needed to go home. Seeing how profoundly this news shook Weitzer, Hatsumi smiled at him within her heart. She then turned to her other companions who had yet to speak.

"What do you two think?"

"As far as I'm concerned, if that's what you want, then..."

"That's all up to you. Personally, I'll be lonely, but what are you gonna do?"

"Yeah..."

Selphy was hesitant to say anything, but not Gaius. He gave an honest and sympathetic answer, though he did seem quite a bit more sullen and serious than usual. He wasn't quite as bad off as Weitzer, who was still standing there with a bitter and flustered look on his face. Hatsumi was a little worried about how pale the king had gotten, but she imagined he felt much the same way.

Nobody said anything after that. An awkward silence swept over the gazebo that lasted until a soldier suddenly came rushing into the garden. It wasn't a palace guard, however. Based on his clothing, he looked to be a soldier from Larsheem. The way he tripped over his own legs as he ran across the lawn was borderline slapstick, but it was just a testament to how frantic he was. The palace guards running with him helped him along, and he eventually made it over to the gazebo. He looked exhausted.

"What is it, man?! What's wrong?!"

"Sir!"

The soldier saluted Gaius with gusto, then threw himself down on his knees.

"I have a report to make to His Majesty posthaste!"

"What has you so panicked?" the king asked. "I will caution you that you stand before the hero."

"M-My apologies, sire!"

The soldier apologetically bowed his head. Satisfied, the king returned to the matter at hand.

"So, what has happened? Seeing the state you are in, I cannot imagine it is anything trivial."

Everyone could already tell something serious was afoot. Tension mounted in the air as they waited for the out of breath soldier to answer.

"The demon invasion has begun anew!"

And so Hatsumi's brief respite came to an end.



Currently, the occupied demon territory was butted right up against Gaius's homeland, Larsheem. There was originally a band of barren borderland between the two, but the demons had seized most of it when they first advanced on the Alliance. There were a slew of simple fortresses in the area, all leftover from the days of the first demon invasion ages ago.

Hatsumi and the others had pushed back the demon army enough that those fortresses now served as the front line, and that was exactly where they were headed. It was a four day trip by foot, but Hatsumi and her companions rode out in front of the others with a small group of reinforcements and made it there with astounding speed.

In the area of the main fortress, soldiers were hurriedly moving supplies into tents. Preparing for a decisive, large-scale battle, men from each of the Alliance nations were all restlessly moving around. Seeing this all from horseback as they approached, Hatsumi and the others stopped and dismounted in front of a particular tent.

Inside were generals representing each of the Alliance armies, and staff officers who were in the midst of discussing strategy for the upcoming battle. Hatsumi knew them all from their previous battles. They were expecting her as well, so none of them were surprised at the hero's arrival.

As a hero, Hatsumi took the seat of honor at the table, with Weitzer next to her. As the one who'd summoned her, Selphy took her place standing behind Hatsumi. After everyone was seated, Weitzer questioned the staff officers of Miazen's army.

"What is the current situation?"

"Currently, Your Highness, the armies of Larsheem and Miazen are forming the linchpin with soldiers deployed on both flanks. We believe the demon army intends to attack head-on, and we have men in position to face them with layered defenses."

"What about the fortresses?"

"The northwest, north-northwest, north, and north-northeast fortresses are under attack. Reinforcements are moving there now and are fighting bravely, but the attack on the north-northeast fortress seems to be particularly severe. The situation is grave."

Gaius let out a groan upon hearing the staff officer's anxious report.

“I thought we left plenty of forces there...”

“The number of demons far exceeds the number of deployed soldiers. That’s why we decided to strategically send reinforcements to critical areas. Also...”

The staff officer went into further detail, but as soon as Hatsumi got her head around what was happening...

“It’s a poor strategy.”

“As insightful as ever, Hero-dono,” said Weitzer. “Do you think it’s a diversion or dispersion strategy?”

Weitzer asked for confirmation on Hatsumi’s assessment. After she nodded back at him with a knowing look, Selphy nodded too.

“It is likely that Hatsumi’s prediction is correct. While the main demon army is facing down the Alliance forces, several detachments could be employing diversionary tactics. Or perhaps it’s just a trap to draw in men. Maybe even the hero.”

“That’s why I believe dividing our forces further is a poor strategy.”

“Indeed. The demon’s tactics are quite transparent.”

It seemed Hatsumi and Selphy were on the same page. Anybody should be able to see the writing on the wall in this situation. It was only obvious what the demons were up to. The big question now was what their motivations behind such a strategy were. Gaius turned a stern look towards the staff officer.

“What’s the scale of the demon armies attacking each fortress?”

“Other than at the north-northeast fortress, the demons outnumber deployed soldiers about two to one. It seems forces are continuously pouring in at the north-northeast fortress, and we estimate our men are outnumbered four to one there.”

“That’s a lot...”

With the soldiers so outnumbered, they were practically trapped in the other fortresses and couldn’t put up much of a fight. They had the grit to hold out for a while. But the demons had the north-northeast fortress so swamped that it was only a matter of time before it fell. They badly needed reinforcements—and a lot of them. It would take a considerable, concentrated effort to turn things around.

“So those bastards are really just trying to split us up, huh? It’s simple, but effective. It’s usually their plan to look like they have a plan when they’re really just rampaging and marauding. It’s a front. A deception.”

“Yes, this may very well be the same thing.”

Hatsumi acknowledged Gaius’s theory. It was perhaps the only viable conclusion for now. They didn’t have enough information to determine whether or not there was a grander scheme in action. As the conversation continued, the staff officer’s expression turned bitter.

“The men there are holding out for the time being, but it is a matter of course that the north-northeast fortress will be overrun at this rate.”

“That’s no good, huh...” mused Gaius.

“No. Once that fortress falls, the demons will use it as a gateway to flood the area with more forces,” replied the officer.

A heavy silence hung in the air for a moment. Weitzer then moved the conversation along.

“So, what will we do about the reinforcements?”

“Our main plan, Your Highness, is to send more of them from here. And our secondary one... My apologies, but we would like Hero-sama to lead them.”

The staff officer who proposed the plan was standing at attention. The reason they’d suggested the main plan first was likely as a reserved appeal to the hero. By all means, it was the best hand to play. But a mere staff officers and generals hadn’t the authority to directly order the hero into battle. Sensing what they were asking of her, Hatsumi gave a resolute nod.

“We can’t afford to stay idle. The number of reinforcements we can send to the other fortresses is limited. So that we’re ready when the main force of the demon army makes a move, we can’t spare too many men.”

“Then that’s that.”

“Since our troop is both mobile and quite capable, there’s no other choice than for us to handle this.”

It seemed each of her companions was in agreement with her.

“Then that’s enough talk. We’ll move out once preparations are complete, so please take care of the arrangements.”

Hatsumi modestly bowed her head to the present generals, who all bowed back in a fluster.



After their strategy meeting, Hatsumi and the others took action

quickly. They hadn't even had the time to recover from their journey, so they left behind the forces they'd brought with them and spearheaded a group of fresh soldiers the generals had in waiting. From there, they headed for the north-northeast fortress in the borderlands.

They were intentionally heading where the demon attacks were fiercest. In an open and slightly elevated position between the mountains and forests, there stood a tall defensive wall made from roughly-hewn darkwood. Watchtowers were stationed in all four cardinal directions. It was far from top-tier security, but it had so far managed to hold the fortress contained within.

Unlike the main fortress where Hatsumi and the others had just come from, this one had already been taken once and recaptured. The destruction and subsequent restoration meant the facilities weren't in the best repair. The sturdy darkwood walls were battle-scarred, and sections were missing here and there. At first glance, the whole thing seemed flimsy.

But upon arriving, things were much quieter here than anyone had expected. It seemed that the demons' assault had come to a stop for the moment. They could see the fortress scrambling to recover after a skirmish, but at present, they were not being attacked. Leaving the forces they brought with them to Selphy, Hatsumi went ahead with Gaius and Weitzer into the fortress and ascended the main watchtower.

The fortress' commander was surveying the situation from there, and was in the middle of giving out orders to the troops below. Based on the shoulder pads he was wearing, he seemed to be an officer from Larsheem. As Hatsumi and the others approached, he stiffly fell to one knee. After Gaius ordered him to be at ease, he immediately cut to the chase.

"How's the situation?"

"Sir, the battle with the demons has currently fallen into a stalemate. It seems those demons are also at a loss on how to continue and let up on their attack. We're currently tending to our wounded and repairing the fortress."

The commander gave his report in a slightly excited tone. He was probably still filled with adrenaline and exaltation from the previous day's battle. Seeing him like this, Gaius flashed his characteristic smile.

"You held out, huh? You did good."

“Those words are more than I deserve, General Forvan.”

The commander lightly bowed his head in a display of gratitude. Hatsumi then asked him for further details.

“So, are those the demons?”

The commander gave her an enthusiastic nod, still clearly in an exuberant state. From the top of the watchtower, they could see all the way down to the foot of the hill. That’s where Hatsumi’s attention was. And for one simple reason: that’s where the demon army was. Preparing to lay siege to the fortress again, they were organizing themselves at the bottom of the hill.

They weren’t carrying out their business in the orderly fashion a human army would be, but they were digging trenches and placing makeshift walls of cut wood. At the very least, it looked like a proper military encampment. Hatsumi couldn’t get an extensive view of the area behind them, but it also looked like they’d laid waste to the outskirts of the region. It was likely a measure to slow any pursuing troops should they have to retreat.

“It looks like they’re getting into battle formation to show up.”

“As long as they’re not attacking us, it’s fine. They’ll do that to try and intimidate us. Once in a while, they’ll start howling or lay waste to the land. They’re likely aiming to exhaust us...”

Before Hatsumi arrived, the fort was in dire straits. A little psychological warfare might have been all it took to finish them off. The soldiers knew they had reinforcements coming, but the time spent waiting chipped away at their morale. The demons took advantage of that, doing what they could to build anxiety and terror in the fort while they waited for the right time to attack. But it was strange...

What the demons were doing made sense. It was strategically viable. In other words, it was completely uncharacteristic of the savage demons. They would normally lunge in for the kill at the first sign of weakness, so it was extraordinarily unusual for them to bide their time to put pressure on an already sapped opponent. It was possible that they were waiting for reinforcements before attacking, but Hatsumi still thought it was rather odd. Seeing the pensive look on her face, Weitzer called out to her.

“Hero-dono, is something the matter?”

“We should rout them, same as usual. But I do have to wonder... Aren’t the actions of these demons strange?”

“I don’t believe there’s any additional information available

than what was just reported to us. There are no other demons in the area.”

“Then there doesn’t seem to be a problem.”

Immediately after Hatsumi made up her mind, Selphy’s voice rose up to meet them from the foot of the watchtower.

“Hatsumi, a message has arrived.”

“What’s the news?”

“It seems the demons’ main army is on the move. The Alliance army is currently moving in response.”

The time had come. A palpable tension mounted in the air with Selphy’s report, and all who heard it were astir.

“Like we thought, it was a plan to disperse our forces... How insolent,” Weitzer spat bitterly.

The demons had timed their attack to move on the main army after they’d divided the Alliance forces as best they could. And in the end, the humans had played right into their clutches. It was perfectly clear now that the attacks on the north-northeast fortress were just a diversion.

“Let’s defeat them quickly and return. Also, Weitzer, when this is over, assign the soldiers we brought along to this fortress.”

“To compensate for the defenses, right? As you wish.”

As Weitzer humbly agreed, Gaius looked to Hatsumi for orders.

“What do we do?”

“I’m planning to sally out and meet them from here. We’ll quickly charge in and render them helpless, then drive them back. I think that’d be best. What about you two?”

“I’m also in favor of this,” replied Weitzer.

“It’s not like there’s any other way to do it, really,” said Gaius.

That much was true. Hatsumi’s plan was their only real option. They needed to go on the offensive, and they didn’t have time to spare. They couldn’t afford to do something more intricate like lure the enemy somewhere they could ambush them. And there would be too many casualties if they only sent soldiers in for a frontal attack. That’s why it’d be up to Hatsumi and the others. Now that they had their plan, Weitzer turned to the commander.

“Commander, what is the status of the troops remaining in the fortress?”

“Many of them are wounded or exhausted. In a defensive battle, we could put three quarters of them into action, but I think only about half are up to a sortie.”

“Selphy, how about the soldiers we brought with us?”

“They had sufficient rest interposed during the march, so there should be no problems having them participate.”

“Then have them prepare for battle at once. We’ll split our forces into three units. The left and right flanks will protect both sides of the main force led by Hero-dono as it cuts into the demon army. After forming up in front of the fortress, we’ll move out immediately!”

As soon as Weitzer gave instructions, all the soldiers began moving. Not only was he royalty, he was a companion of the hero. If he gave an order, it would be followed to a T. Meanwhile, Hatsumi called out to Gaius.

“Let’s go right away as well. Are you ready?”

“Damn right. I’m itching to go.”

Gaius struck his palm with his fist as he replied. Watching him descend from the watchtower, Hatsumi placed her foot on the railing and kicked off of it as she jumped down. Such a daring, impressive act from the hero would ordinarily make the soldiers boil with excitement, but right now, nobody had the leisure to be watching what she was doing. Cutting through the crowd of soldiers gathering in formation, Hatsumi dashed to the front gate.

Once preparations for battle were complete, the signal whistle to open the gate resounded through the air. And as the gate opened, Hatsumi turned around to face the troops forming ranks behind her. She could see the faces of soldiers brimming with excitement to follow her—the hero—into battle. She didn’t need to give a single word of inspiration.

Morale was so high because the soldiers had all heard tale of Hatsumi’s repeated triumphs over the demons. Not a single one of them doubted that victory would be theirs today with Hatsumi on their side. She was their hope, and knowing that made emotion well in Hatsumi’s chest. Choking it back, she passed her gaze over the assembled troops. Weitzer then stepped out in front of them.

“From here, we will strike at the demons who are besieging this fortress! Even including our reinforcements, those wretched beasts outnumber us! But we have a hero on our side—a hero worth ten thousand men! As long as she is fighting with us, we will never lose! And you are all honored to fight alongside her, the hero recognized by the Goddess Alshuna herself! Everyone, take pride in facing this battle!”

As Weitzer's unusually zealous speech came to an end, the soldiers raised a remarkably loud war cry. When their shouts faded, Weitzer and Gaius took their places at Hatsumi's side. Then, on Weitzer's command, they and the soldiers all rushed down the hill from the fortress. A safe distance out from the demon encampment, they stopped and took formation.

"It seems the demons have noticed us and are already on the move," remarked Hatsumi.

"With us forming up here on the middle of the hill, it's easy enough for them to see," said Weitzer.

Just as he finished explaining, the commander's voice rang out from behind.

"The formation is ready! We can attack at any time!"

Hatsumi looked at her companions and gave a single nod. When she did, Weitzer yelled out his orders.

"Mage units, prepare to chant!"

In battles where devastation was the goal and there wasn't any more complex strategy at work than that, it was an established tactic to use magic units to strike a preemptive blow. They would fire off a multitude of spells as one, which would be followed by a barrage from the archers and a charge from the cavalry and foot soldiers.

"After the magic volley ends, we're charging in! Vanguard, gather your courage!" shouted Gaius to the front line of troops.

But over him, an ominous wail could be heard coming from the demons' side. Weitzer didn't waste any time calling out orders to Selphy.

"Selphy, after the preemptive strike finishes—"

"I'll take the unit around and provide support from the flanks, right? Understood. Mage units, begin your incantations! Use fire and wind magic to deliver the demons a fell blow!"

After confirming the plan, Selphy gave the word to the unit of mages. The air was quickly filled with the sound of them chanting in unison, and moments later, a volley of fire magic fanned by wind magic flew towards the demons all at once. The first strike crashed into a group of them spreading out at the foot of the hill. A second and third strike quickly followed, and the thunderous rumble of exploding flames echoed far and wide.

"Wind users, keep the wind's direction in check! Keep our forces upwind at all times! Don't be negligent in making

adjustments!”

Selphy continued to issue orders, and the mages continued with a flurry of spells to try and slow the demons’ advance. Seeing the demons directly in front of them march through the flames, the swordsmen then took action. The vanguard prepared to draw their swords, and Weitzer lifted his own towards the sky. Just as the sunlight reflected off the tip of his blade...

“Alright, all at once—”

Right when he was about to give the order to charge, a report from the right flank came in in the form of a scream.

“Your Highness! Demon reinforcements from the right side!”

“Wha?!”

“Now?!”

Weitzer and Hatsumi’s surprised shouts overlapped. Gaius, meanwhile, bellowed at the messenger.

“There’s a mountain to our right! What’s going on?!”

“They’re flying demons! They’re coming at us from the skies!”

“Did they prepare an ambush...?” Gaius mused.

“The commander said they hadn’t...” Hatsumi replied, still somewhat stunned.

The commander had indeed said there didn’t appear to be other demons in the area. Just what did this mean? As such thoughts spun in Hatsumi’s head, Weitzer looked at her with a severe expression.

“There is no point wondering about it now. We’ll simply have to dispatch some men to handle it. Troops, advance immediately and support the vanguard! Mages in front, hurry to the right flank and support the troops there!”

Just as he hastily gave his orders, another messenger came running over. It wasn’t good news.

“Reporting, Your Highness! Demons have now appeared on the left side to the north as well! Their numbers far exceeds the demons here!”

“Wha— How can that be?!” exclaimed Hatsumi.

“Ridiculous! It’s like they saw right through us...” spat Weitzer.

“No way! Just when we were about to make a move...” groaned Gaius.

The timing was too coincidental. The demons had reinforcements show up from both sides just as the humans attacked. It was like they’d been waiting for this. At this rate, the demons might close in and surround them completely. Panicked,

Weitzer let out an angry roar.

“Can’t we fight back?!”

“Th-There’s too many of them! They had double our numbers to begin with, and now it’s several times that! We won’t stand a chance in a direct clash!”

There was a forest to the left, so Weitzer couldn’t see the approaching demons from that direction just yet, but the ones coming down from the mountain were now clearly visible.

“That many? You’re kidding...”

There were enough of them in the air to black out the mountainside with a dark red wriggling mass of flapping wings. There were far too many. The soldiers currently on the right flank would never be able to defeat them all. And now even more were approaching the left flank... But it was a mystery. The demons hadn’t had time to call for reinforcements. This should have been impossible unless they’d had an ambush lying in wait all this time. But with such a large force at hand, they would’ve had no trouble taking the fortress by brute force. There was no point in setting a trap like this.

But nevertheless, they’d lured the Alliance army right into their clawed clutches. It had to mean they were expecting reinforcements to come, but not even that made sense. There was no meaning in going to so much trouble just to beat down reinforcements.

“Tch! The demons had more than just their main army and the detached forces attacking the fortresses?!” Gaius yelled in frustration.

Hearing those words, something suddenly clicked for Hatsumi.

“I see, a detached force...”

Her voice was drowned out by the screaming and all the commotion in their surroundings. She could barely hear Weitzer shouting orders right next to her.

“All forces, maintain formation! If we break ranks now, the demons will take advantage of it! Hurry!”

If Weitzer was giving the order to maintain formation, that had to mean they were planning to hold and fight. But even if they held fast and fought defensively, it was obvious what would happen to them against a demon army of this size. They were at a crossroads. Realizing they didn’t stand a chance of winning against the demons like this, Hatsumi yelled out at the top of her lungs.

“Retreat!”

“Huh?”

“Hero-dono?!”

Bewildered voices rose up all around, particularly from Gaius and Weitzer. Hatsumi turned to the two of them and passed down her command.

“Everyone retreat! All advancing units, fall back!”

“But Hero-dono, if we do that, the line of defense will crumble!”

“That may be so, but there are just too many of them! Even if we fight, we’ll only be annihilated!”

“B-But if we retreat so readily, then morale will...”

Certainly, after continuous victories, the morale of the entire Alliance army had swelled. And if forces led directly by the hero now retreated without even putting up a fight, that inflated morale would burst like a balloon. However...

“I don’t think it’s okay to suffer casualties just to maintain morale.”

As Hatsumi bluntly spoke her mind, Weitzer gave up on the idea of clinging to the battle. He too knew it was foolish to continue fighting against all odds.

“...Understood. Then hurry up and form up the rear guard. We shall use the defensive capabilities of the fortress to...”

“No, have all the soldiers in the fortress withdraw too.”

“You mean to have them retreat as well?”

“Then what’re we gonna do about slowing these bastards down?” Gaius asked.

“Without a rear guard, we cannot even run...” added Weitzer.

It was just as they said. It was critical to have a caboose unit of troops to slow the enemy down in their pursuit so that all the other troops could flee. But Hatsumi knew that already.

“Of course we’ll assemble a rear guard. But it will only consist of us and any men that can be spared. Don’t hole up in the fortress as you go; move past it. We’re abandoning it.”

“Abandoning it, you say?”

“Is it worth throwing away these men’s lives to protect?”

Hearing her words, both Weitzer and Gaius fell silent. They knew why Hatsumi was making this choice. It was true that this boundary fortress was an important base for keeping the demon invasion in check, but at this rate, even if they tried to defend it, they would only end up capitulating. That’s why it was vital for

them to give it up and retreat while they still could.

“And if either of you objects to being in the rear guard, I won’t force you to be.”

Hatsumi presented them the choice about their positions. She had no intention of forcing them to do anything. However, just as she expected, neither one of them declined. Both Weitzer and Gaius, though their faces were covered in sweat, gave reassuring nods and promised to support the soldiers as they retreated. But then another panicked report came in.

“The right flank! They can’t take it anymore! The left flank is also about to collapse!”

“That was fast...”

“We were reeled in. Completely and utterly. We didn’t even have time to draw our swords.”

Everything had gone exactly according to what the demons had planned. They were at such a disadvantage that there was no way for them to even fight back. They’d be doing well just to successfully retreat. It was about then that Selphy, who was leading the mage units, came running over.

“Prince Weitzer, what is the situation here?”

“We just decided our plan.”

“To hold our ground?”

“No... We’ll be retreating.”

Weitzer and Selphy both bit down on their lips bitterly. As their exchange ended, Hatsumi spoke up.

“Weitzer. Gaius. Selphy.”

“At your service.”

“What’s up?”

“Yes, Hatsumi?”

“From here, we’ll disperse and fight. After buying the others some time, scatter and flee. Each of you take a unit of the rear guard with you as you go. I’ll move independently on my own.”

“Independently? You...”

“Hatsumi! You can’t do that!”

Weitzer was concerned, but Selphy didn’t hesitate to decry Hatsumi’s decision. To say she was worried would be putting it lightly. But there was a reason Hatsumi had chosen this plan of action.

“I have the divine protection from the hero summoning ritual. I have more endurance than everyone else. I’ll manage one way or

the other.”

“Even so, for you to be alone—” Gaius began to object.

“If I imprudently took soldiers along, they would only weigh me down. Don’t you see?”

“Th-That’s... certainly true...”

Unlike Gaius, who was at a complete loss for words, Weitzer had no trouble speaking his mind.

“No, Hero-dono. I will accompany you.”

“You can’t. If we don’t split up, who will protect the soldiers?”

“I was ordered by His Majesty the King to aid you. Also, I would like to help—”

“Weitzer.”

“Hero-dono...”

When she called him by his name, he met her gaze. It was clear from the look in his eyes that he had no intention of yielding. Seeing this, Hatsumi played a cowardly hand.

“I will be fine on my own. So, Weitzer, I need you to join the rear guard and retreat all the way to the main force with a unit under your command. If I say it’s an order from the hero, will you listen?”

“Hero-dono, that...”

“Hatsumi...”

“Hey, that’s...”

He had no choice but to comply with the hero’s orders. That was why Hatsumi had never spoken like this before. Once she did, neither Weitzer nor any of her other companions had a choice in the matter.

“Urgh... As you wish...”

It was a painful situation—both for him and for Hatsumi. After hanging his head for a moment, Weitzer firmly picked himself up and faced the soldiers.

“From here, our army will retreat! Abandon the fortress! Those who have strength left to fight in the rear guard, stay with me! Everyone else, hurry and retreat all the way to the main force in the wastelands!”

With that, the commanders of each unit embroiled in a free-for-all fight on the battlefield passed down the order to retreat. It was about then that Hatsumi realized a cold, unpleasant sweat was dripping down the back of her neck.



After Hatsumi and the others were scattered by the demons' offensive, Weitzer made it all the way back to the main force. There, without taking a moment to rest, he immediately took command of the battle.

"Preserve the right flank! Send a messenger to Valvauro's army and have a portion of the left flank come around to the center! The main force will hold our lines and take the attack, and the right flank push them back!"

By the time he returned to the main force, the demons were already advancing on the main Alliance forces deployed in the wastelands. It had looked like the four national armies had the demons outnumbered at first, but the demon army was much larger than they had imagined. The front line for the most part had fallen into a stalemate.

"Ugh... Even after getting back to the main forces, we're still in a difficult position..."

After issuing orders from a position where he could see the trend of the battle, Weitzer bitterly grumbled to himself. As he did, a staff officer from the army arrived to give a report.

"Your Highness! Both armies are evenly matched as things are, but we don't have enough of an advantage for us to turn things in our favor. I believe we should pull back here and rally."

"Don't be foolish! Are you saying we should fall back behind the main fortress?! If we do that, then Hero-dono will have nowhere to return to! Until she comes back to us, we will hold this position!"

"B-But Your Highness... Then the army will..."

Even if they weren't wiped out, they would suffer considerable casualties. But the staff officer couldn't bring himself to say that.

"Losing the hero would also be a major blow to the Alliance army. We would lose the power bestowed to us by the Goddess Alshuna. Understood?"

The staff officer still couldn't say anything. On the battlefield, the hero's power was tremendous. Hatsumi's skills were admirable on their own, but they were augmented even further by the divine blessing she'd received. In all the battles up until now, she had never once depleted her stamina, willpower, or concentration. She was virtually unstoppable. This was common knowledge among the Alliance army. But weighing her life against the army's was

something the staff officer was incapable of.

"I understand your dilemma," said Weitzer to the staff officer. "In any normal battle, that would be the right call. But I cannot even stand for such a thought to be entertained. For the reputation of our army and my own mental health. Historians! Do not record what the staff officer just said!"

The historians nodded at Weitzer's command. A fluttering green robe then came into view.

"Prince Weitzer."

"Selphy? What is it?"

Around the time Weitzer linked up with the main forces, Selphy had also returned. As far as he knew, she was organizing the mage units on the right flank into three regiments and fighting a hard battle. So for her to have left them and come all this way, something must have happened.

"Just now, Sir Gaius returned from the west along with his unit."

"So he's returned! And? Is Hero-dono with him?"

"That's... The survivors of the unit under his command are unaware Hero-dono's location..."

"Tch...!"

He bit down on his lip. The heavens hadn't answered his prayer. A man's voice then cut into their conversation from afar.

"Yo, Weitzer! What the hell is going on?!"

"Sir Gaius! I told you to withdraw!"

Rather than falling back, Gaius had pursued Selphy. She readily began yelling at him, but he and Weitzer paid her no mind as they discussed the situation.

"Well?"

"It's not good."

"What about pushing back those shithead demons, then?!"

"We're taking action."

Knowing that the main force was facing a difficult battle and that a mission to rescue Hatsumi was getting more and more unlikely by the minute, Gaius stamped his foot like he was trying to quash his irritation.

"Even though she insisted on going into a different forest from us..."

"Don't say it. If it was an order from the hero, you had to obey. We all did."

Gaius slumped his shoulders and sat down on the spot as Weitzer tried to persuade him that the way things had unfolded was inevitable. They all knew that Hatsumi was strong—that she had power even beyond what they'd seen. If she'd told them she would be alright, they had no choice but to believe her. To obey.

"Sir Gaius, fall back! Even if your wounds are healed, it's plain to see you're at your limits! Now quickly, go with the other survivors."

"I hear ya, but I can't do that in this kinda situation. I'll wait here for Hatsumi's return."

"But..."

Contrary to Selphy, who was still trying to dissuade Gaius, Weitzer spoke with the authority he'd been vested with.

"Do as you will. But if you get in the way..."

"Yeah, you can just leave me the hell behind. Don't mistake what's important."

They had come to a mutual understanding. Seeing the two of them like that, Selphy calmed down and let out a tired sigh. As she did, an out-of-breath soldier then came running up to them from the rear.

"Reporting! Just now, guild members from the Twilight Pavilion have arrived to provide assistance!"

The messenger had come inform them of reinforcements. But what should have been good news failed to brighten the mood.

"Even so..." muttered Weitzer.

It wasn't like a few reinforcements could change the tide of battle now. The guild's support was welcome, but they didn't have the numbers to offer enough resistance to challenge an entire army. Especially not one of this size.

"They've brought several high-ranking members, including Camellia Sasanqua, Empress of the Sword Dance. I expect they will be able to preserve the front to a certain extent."

"Certainly, if that is the case..." Selphy said with a glimmer of hope in her voice.

Gaius, however, didn't share her enthusiasm.

"But the demons are raring to go. I don't think things will—"

But just as he was about to share his doubts, a second messenger came from the front lines. Which could only mean one thing...

"The demons are overtaking us! They'll be here soon!"

“What did you say?!” shouted Weitzer.

“The hell are you doing?! Fuck!” shouted Gaius.

The staff officer with them went completely pale. A hole had opened up in the formation on the front line, and the demons immediately began pushing through it, slaughtering as they went. In other words, they were making a beeline for the commander. Weitzer drew his sword and Gaius got to his feet.

“We’re fighting back! Staff officers, fall back and call for support! Everyone here get into formation immediately! We’ll meet the demons and counterattack!”

At Weitzer’s command, the soldiers present quickly took their positions. The spearmen advanced to the front and put together a wall of spears, and the swordsmen lined up along both flanks. Behind them all, together with Weitzer, were the mages standing in a row. They were prepared to fire as soon as the order came down. And as Gaius and Selphy prepared for battle too, the demons came into sight.

“There’s a lot of ’em...”

There was easily over a hundred demons who’d broken through the front line. They had enormous monsters with them, and were moving as a single group at a rather terrifying speed.

“We’ll fire spells at them first. After that, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Both Weitzer and Gaius nodded, wordlessly agreeing to Selphy’s plan. Every single person present was pale and had broken into a cold sweat. They’d managed to get into formation in time, but with only a handful of mages with them, the best they’d be able to do was take out the front line of monsters. It would be up to the spearmen and swordsmen to buy time until the mages could get off their next round of spells, but they were sorely outnumbered. It was uncertain if they could hold out long enough.

They all held their breath as they waited for the demons to come into range of the mages’ spells. And soon enough, the mages all began chanting in unison and let their magic fly. Fireballs rushed towards the demons like cannon fire. All the spears and swords the soldiers had at the ready shined brilliantly in the orange light passing overhead. But the demons were undeterred. They simply marched on through the fire.

No one had expected to stop the demons in their tracks completely, but this wasn’t good. They hadn’t done anything at all

to slow down the advancing force. Everyone gulped as they watched in horror. And just about then, a solemn, quiet voice could be heard carried on the wind.

“Just as the eternal wind conveys, send the shining and swaying flames to His side! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim dyed in white! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim that shakes off all calamity! And so, I shall sing and recite them once: Eva, Zurdick, Rozeia, Deivikusd...”

It was a chant for a spell, made clear by a white, revolving magic circle that formed in the air. It seemed to spin the very air around it, and quickly gave birth to a gale. The circle then began glowing brightly.

“Mow them down! Truth Flare!”

[White Flame Hyacinth!]

A white flame coiled around the group of soldiers in a flash, and with a sound like a high-pitched shriek, it swept right into the demons. Then, between the white light and the turbulent wind, there was a tremendous explosion. After a soundless moment, a thunderous roar shook the earth. And as the white light vanished, the demons vanished along with it. Looking at the remnants of the white flame that were still vigorously flickering in front of the spearmen, Weitzer came to his senses and raised a loud cry of surprise.

“What is this?!”

“It’s probably magic, but this destructive power is...”

He couldn’t tell what was going on at all. There was no mage in the Alliance who could use magic which such devastating power. Not even Selphy could tell him what it was.

“Either way, with that destructive power... Almost all of them were completely blown away,” mumbled Gaius.

“It’s not just that. The embers are still taking down the remaining demons in the area. There’s no longer any need for us to do anything.”

“Heh, what a waste of our heroic resolve...”

“That’s something to be grateful for. But even so, this kind of magic... Just who could...”

As Weitzer furrowed his brow, the rear line of soldiers parted, and a single woman approached. She had glossy silver hair and wore a robe the same color as the flame that had just incinerated the demons. There was no doubt she was the one who’d cast the

spell. It was, of course, none other than Felmenia.

“It seems we made it in time...”

“Just now, that was you— Wait, aren’t you that little lady that I met at the restaurant?!”

Gaius’s eyes shot wide open in surprise when he spotted a familiar figure. Recognizing him too, Felmenia gave a polite greeting.

“A pleasure, Forvan-dono.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Do you know her? Just who is she?” asked Selphy.

“I just happened to meet her at a restaurant on my way back last time, but... That really was some amazing magic. A white flame, huh?”

After seeing Felmenia’s magic and hearing Gaius’s brief story, Selphy looked a little surprised. She seemed to have figured it out.

“Could you be the mage from Astel they call the White Flame, Felmenia Stingray-dono?”

“What?! U-Um...”

Having her identity revealed immediately, Felmenia began to panic. Though in truth, she should have known this would happen when she used her signature white flame.

“Hey, hey, hey! Wait a minute! This little lady is the White Flame...?”

“What is a court mage of Astel doing here?” Weitzer asked, seemingly aware of who Felmenia was as well.

That was when Suimei stepped out from behind her.

“Well, a lot happened.”

“You’re—”

“Yo.”

Seeing Weitzer completely dumbstruck, Suimei waved lightly. It was a greeting meant for Gaius and the others as well, but seeing Suimei act so casually, Gaius seemed to come to some kind of a realization.

“Ah, since the little lady’s here, I shoulda known you’d be, too.”

“Well, yeah. Besides, it’s not just us, you know?”

As he said this, Suimei looked over to Rumeya, who was smoking her pipe.

“Hello, Larsheem’s General of the Fist. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Ugeh?! Sasanqua of the Seven Swords!”

“Huh? What’s with the “ugeh”? Do you want me to beat you to a pulp again?”

“Give me a break... I mean, please.”

Gaius’s usually foolhardy demeanor crumbled before Rumeya. It was quite clear they had a history. Selphy, on the other hand, addressed Rumeya with a curious expression.

“So you’re the reinforcements from the guild?”

“Yeah, that’s right. By the way...”

As Rumeya began looking around, Lefille and Liliana approached the group as well.

“It looks like you’ve been pushed back quite a bit.”

“It’s not... a good situation.”

“The little lady with the sword and the tiny one are here too, huh? Yeah, the number of demons far exceeded what we were expecting.”

Both Lefille and Liliana were quite experienced in battle and had no trouble reading the situation. Rather than not good, it was just plain bad. They weren’t exactly backed up against a wall, but it was taking everything they had just to hold the front line. Hearing this, Rumeya let out a sigh and frowned.

“So that’s the kind of mess we’re in... I’ll send the lot from the guild into action then. You don’t mind, right, Prince Weitzer?”

“No. I thank you for your assistance, Sasanqua-dono.”

During this exchange, Suimei was looking around dubiously. He suddenly realized that somebody who was supposed to be there... wasn’t.

“Have you seen Hatsumi, Menia?”

“Now that you mention it, she doesn’t appear to be here...”

Felmenia began looking around too, but neither of them saw her anywhere. What Suimei did see, however, were the bitter expressions on the faces of the people from the Alliance. He decided to try asking them.

“Hey, where’s Hatsumi?”

“...What will you do with that information?”

Weitzer returned a question of his own in an irritated tone. Hearing this, Suimei grimaced and shot right back at him.

“The hell? Got a problem with me asking?”

Suimei glared at him sharply, but Weitzer only glared back and stayed silent. Seeing this display, the soldiers from Miazén were filled with anger. They couldn’t stay silent seeing some ingrate treat

their prince with such disrespect. On their behalf, a staff officer came forward and flared up at Suimei.

“Hey, you bastard! How dare you speak like that to His—”

“Shut up and mind your own business.”

There was no time to get into some petty argument, so Suimei wasted no time forcibly shutting the staff officer’s mouth. No longer able to open his mouth by his own will, the staff officer was frozen in surprise for a moment, and then struggled to open his mouth with his hands.

“Anyone else wanna fucking complain? Step right up.”

As Suimei scowled at the crowd, the soldiers faltered. Though a little late, Gaius gestured to them and warned them to stay back. In a complete change from the friendly attitude from before, Suimei’s face was twisted with irritation. It was Selphy who finally offered an answer to his question.

“Hatsumi is not here.”

“She’s not?”

“No...”

Selphy shook her head as she answered quietly. She then told Suimei and the others what had happened at the boundary fortress.

“...So you guys were ambushed?”

“And then we were scattered. The rest of us met back up here...”

“So that’s what happened, huh...?”

Hearing Weitzer groan as he finished explaining why Hatsumi wasn’t present, Suimei pinched his brow. Things had taken an unexpected turn—possibly the worst imaginable.

“A rescue... If it was something you could do, you’d already be doing it, right?”

Without waiting for anyone to reply, Suimei seemed to come to an answer on his own. He stayed silent for a moment, then turned to Selphy with a firm expression.

“So, which way?”

“Which... way?”

“Which way was that fortress?”

“Why are you asking something like that, you bastard?” Weitzer cut in.

“I’m gonna save her. Duh. Knowing the general direction will make things easier.”

Though gripped with surprise, Weitzer flared up.

“You... If you do that, it will mean plunging into the demon army, you know?!”

“Yeah, I didn’t need you to tell me that.”

“What?! Then don’t be foolish! Just what exactly do you intend to accomplish by throwing yourself at the demons?!”

Certainly, in a normal situation, that might seem rather reckless. Suimei could somewhat understand why Weitzer was so worked up, but he got the feeling there was more to it.

“Hey, just what’s got you so angry?”

“I am not particularly angry!”

“Okay, well then calm down. But either way, I need to go save Hatsumi. If someone doesn’t, it’ll be bad, right? So this isn’t really the time to be arguing about the details.”

Faced with Suimei’s completely reasonable argument, Weitzer was at a loss for words. And then, as if swallowing down his anger, he cast his eyes down in vexation. Perhaps he understood that he had lost his composure.

“...Are you saying you can do it?”

“I have to. That’s my job.”

Hearing Suimei say this, Selphy spoke up in a fluster.

“H-However, even if you head towards the fortress, you have no way of knowing if you can catch up to her or which way she went...”

“I’ll just have to try my best and look for her. No one’s ever gonna find her if no one’s looking, right?”

“But you know, lad, that the place you’re talking about going is flooded with demons, right?”

“That’s why you’ll distract them, geezer. If you do, I can get by, no problem.”

Suimei shook off all of their anxieties like they were nothing. And all three of them sank into silence.

“Then Suimei-dono, I will go with...”

Just as Felmenia was about to offer to accompany him, Lefille stopped her.

“No, Lady Felmenia. We will stay here.”

“What? Why?!”

“This is a losing battle. The Alliance soldiers are at a disadvantage against those numbers on an open plain. If we don’t suppress the demons’ advance, we can forget about making a comeback. The soldiers won’t even be able to hold the line. So it’s

up to us to attract the demons.”

Lefille gazed over towards the melee on the battlefield as she explained their goal to Felmenia. Watching her, Rumeya put her hand to her chin as she laughed a little.

“You sure said it, Lefi. Do you see those numbers?”

“When those things invaded Noshias, the demons I cut down myself numbered about that many.”

Lefille fearlessly boasted of her skill. They were reassuring words for anyone going into battle at her side, through Weitzer and the others from the Alliance didn’t pay her much attention. Surely it was bravado. Liliana couldn’t help asking.

“Lefille, that’s... a lie... right?”

“Yeah, of course it’s a lie.”

Though she said that, her tone wasn’t particularly convincing. When Noshias was invaded by demons, Suimei had heard there was a preposterous number of them. If that was true, and taking into account Lefille’s true abilities...

“Um, Suimei-dono...”

“Yeah, I don’t think she’s really lying...”

Felmenia and Suimei whispered to each other. He didn’t think it was necessarily true down to the number, but he was certain that she had slain an unbelievable sum of demons. It was very possible that she could take down the entire army in front of them without breaking a sweat. Hearing Lefille’s boast, however, Rumeya burst into laughter.

“My, my... You’re in quite a good mood, aren’t you?”

“I’m just happy I’ll be able to vent my anger after all this time. I haven’t fought any demons since I was in Astel.”

Lefille’s cold voice was filled with an extraordinary wrath as she spoke. She then turned towards Suimei.

“So that’s how it is, Suimei-kun.”

“Thanks, I’ll leave it to you. You too, Menia, Rumeya.”

“You can count on us.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get it done lickety-split and save her, you hear?”

After the two of them replied, Liliana, who had been following along, mumbled apologetically.

“There’s nothing... that I can do...”

“You played a huge role this time in your own way. For now, just watch Menia’s magicka and learn as much as you can.”

Hearing Suimei reassure her, Liliana nodded back. And with

that, the conversation swiftly came to an end, though anxiety still lingered in the air. That was natural, however, considering where Suimei was headed.

“It was the fortress to the northeast of here. But how will you get through the demons?”

“I don’t have any intention of struggling my way through that mess.”

As Suimei said that, he nodded in the direction Selphy had pointed. They could faintly see more demons gathering in the distance. They were taking up a formation like they intended to defend. Getting through them would be no mean feat. But Suimei didn’t look worried.

“Ridiculous. Even if you try and go around them, it is not like you can escape their reach.”

“Well, that’s obvious just looking at their numbers.”

Hearing Suimei agree with him, Weitzer’s bewilderment only strengthened. Suimei then stepped forward as Gaius’s voice chased after him, hot on his heels.

“Hey, are you even listening to us, lad?!”

“I can hear you loud and clear. So... I need all of you to stand back a bit.”

“Ah?”

Gaius too only grew more puzzled at Suimei’s response. Without another word, Suimei continued walking forwards. As if flipping open a coat, he flung his arm out, and his normal green clothing changed to a black suit in an instant.

On one hand, Weitzer and Gaius watched on in absolute befuddlement, and on the other, Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, and Rumeya obediently stepped back as they were told. And then...

“Abreq ad Habra...”

[Hurl your thunderbolt even unto death...]

Suimei’s voice quietly resounded in the skies above. And before long, the inhuman shriek of a woman swept across the battlefield.



“There aren’t any flowers, huh?”

Focused on the demons flying through the air and running across the ground, Rumeya stabbed her swords into the earth. She only had two hands, but the number of swords exceeded that. She

had one for each of her golden tails, seven in total. Like a blooming flower, she stood proud in the middle of her circle of swords. She stretched out her arms lightly to the point where she was just barely touching the swords around her with the tips of her fingers, and stood there quietly as she waited.

There were no allies anywhere nearby. If they got even a little bit too close to her, they would get caught in her sword techniques. There was a tacit understanding between her and those who accompanied her on the battlefield. Only her enemies would get close to her. And approach they did. Before long, the demons who were gunning for her came flying in like falling meteors.

“My goodness, even animals have brains. So why is it that these fools who know nothing of elegance rush into their deaths?”

Lying in wait, Rumeya let out a tedious sigh. The first demon that crossed her fell to the ground in eight pieces. Before anyone knew what was happening, her arms were crossed. It was like the afterimage of her having drawn and slashed with all seven swords. A whole crowd of demons came in next. There were ten, maybe twenty of them. But they too all splattered to the ground around her in a shower of blood and a flash of gold and silver.

The Bloody Art of the Fallen Flower. Everything around her was cut to pieces in the blink of an eye, and the bloody pattern on the ground around her looked like a camellia blossom. This was how she'd gotten her title. Watching Rumeya practice her art in full bloom, Lefille let out a sigh of admiration.

“As expected of Rumeya-dono. That was splendid sword handling.”

“That's enough flattery. I don't wanna hear it.”

“It isn't just flattery.”

“What're you saying? You know I can't move while I'm doing this. That's why I lost to a human at the Seven Sword Kings festival.”

Rumeya spoke humbly of herself, but Lefille shook her head.

“Even so, it doesn't change the fact that your sword technique is beautiful.”

“Well, that's obvious.”

Rumeya lived to make the flower of swords bloom on the battlefield. Weitzer, who was also looking over from nearby, spoke up in admiration.

“As long as you're here, Sasanqua-dono, it feels like having the

strength of a hundred soldiers.”

“You’re also going to flatter me, prince? Gimme a break.”

“Hardly. It’s simply fact that you’re the one holding the line right now.”

Things were still overall at a standstill, but it was Weitzer’s opinion that the fact that the demons were no longer slipping through their ranks was because of Rumeya. Perhaps “wishful thinking” was more accurate.

“Nah. I’m pretty sure most of ’em were blown away at the start.”

“Th-That...”

Weitzer fumbled for words, but Rumeya couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Despite witnessing Suimei’s power, Weitzer couldn’t honestly admit to it. He’d watched as Suimei singlehandedly walked up to the line of demons blocking the path to the northeast, muttered a few words, and unleashed a devastating amount of mana.

There was a grand ultramarine magic circle and an enormous bust of what looked like a woman. Anyone caught in it could only catch glimpses of it, but a tempest poured lightning down onto the wastelands. That lightning spread out and snatched up everything within its reach. Even the smallest tendril of it manifested power far beyond the understanding of the people of this world. And then, the pale blue light cast by the lightning blasted away everything in its grasp—including the vast majority of the demons on the right flank of their army. A lone figure had then gone running through the path created by the lightning.

“Thanks to that, I’m able to take it easy here. Same goes for you too, right?”

“...”

Rumeya looked back at him, but Weitzer only frowned and averted his gaze. With that, she finally seemed to sense something.

“Oh dear, is *that* what it is? I see. In that case, you really can’t honestly assess him... Well, setting that aside, just how long do you plan on sitting there, Larsheem’s General?”

“I’m exhausted after taking care of the soldiers coming all the way here. I bet you don’t care though. But since you’re all here now, it’ll all work out one way or the other.”

Gaius threw up both hands as he remained seated. He was being purposefully lazy, but it was something he could only do

because he knew the true power of his allies.

“Anyway, your technique is as terrifying as ever. I don’t know whether it’s ’cause your tails are in the way or what, but I can’t read your movements at all. As one would expect of the esteemed second sword master of the Seven Swords,” said Gaius before turning to Weitzer. “So, what does the esteemed fifth sword master of the Seven Swords think?”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Naaah!”

Gaius replied frivolously to Weitzer’s glare, who then replied with sarcasm of his own.

“If you do not even have the energy to stand up, then be silent. I will at least let you be my herald.”

“My glory days are really over, huh? It’s the end of the road for me if some brat’s telling me that.”

As the two of them were joking with each other, Rumeya turned to Lefille.

“It’s your turn next, Lefi. It’s been a while—bewitch me with those skills of yours.”

“After seeing your techniques just now, my sword will only seem boorish.”

Despite her humble words, Lefille walked to the front. After Rumeya had mercilessly cut down their vanguard, the next line was faltering and keeping their distance. But even then, it was quite a large group of them.

“Sasanqua-dono, who is that girl?” Weitzer asked.

“Hmm? Oh, Lefi? That child is the daughter of a swordsman I admire.”

She spoke nostalgically, but Weitzer still sounded dubious.

“I understand that you trust in her skills, but is this really a situation where you should be standing by and watching?”



“What are you saying, Cloud of Death? The battlefield is the garden where sword masters bloom, no? Do you intend for me to clip that bud before it can— Whoa, goodness me! That child really had a dreadful amount of pent up anger, huh?”

As Rumea was talking, an unbelievable bloodlust swept through the atmosphere.

“This is...”

It was without a doubt Lefille’s. Weitzer felt a chill run down his spine as he imagined himself being cut to pieces. Behind him, Gaius was muttering in an astonished voice.

“...It’s like we don’t even have any ground to stand on anymore...”

Lefille then challenged the demons before her.

“Hear me, demons! You shall become a mist of blood and vanish before my sword forged by the spirits!”

She was shouting in a thunderous voice. Her war cry was accompanied by a whirl of red wind, and froze each of the demons in place. Then, in the blink of an eye, she began rendering them to paste with her sword. It could only be described as a massacre. Against opponents that could not run, fight, or even move, it was a completely one-sided display of excessive violence. In mere moments, she had taken out an entire group of demons.

“Gala Valner.”

[Mountain Breaker.]

Her voice was quiet, but the phenomenon that followed it was explosive. Her large sword became cloaked in a red wind, and she swung it with all her might. That red wind then became a shockwave that rushed towards the demons. Naturally, there was nothing they could do to stop it. All they could do was welcome their deaths. As if burned by a scorching heat, their bodies were reduced to mere ash.

Lefille then charged through the hole she’d opened up in the demons’ formation and devoted all her energy to swinging her sword. Demons flew through the air in all directions. Or, at least, pieces of them. Even a monstrous demon large enough to take up one’s entire field of vision was easy prey for her. After piercing its stomach with a single strike from her sword, she swept to the side. The beast was extravagantly split in two, and crushed the other

demons below it as both halves tumbled to the ground.

They were unable to see Lefille's expression within that red wind. However, without a doubt, as long as her blue eyes were shining like the afterimage of lightning, her wrath was righteous indignation that the demons would never be able to escape.

"To think a sword master like that would still be in the north..."

Other than that, Weitzer was at a loss for words. Felmenia, Suimei, and now this swordswoman... If a general was worth a thousand soldiers, these people were truly the stuff of legends. Their worth on the battlefield was immeasurable.

"As one would expect of an acquaintance of Camellia Sasanqua, Empress of the Sword Dance... It's a relief, honestly."

"No, it's dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

Rumeya suddenly made a sour expression as she clenched her jaw. Gaius and Weitzer then turned towards her with puzzled expressions.

"It may look compelling to you guys, but I can only see a sword of complete desperation in that red wind."

Gaius once more looked over at Lefille, but he was unable to see what Rumeya was talking about.

"I don't see anything dangerous 'bout it? She's dodging their attacks and hasn't been hit, right?"

"Certainly, that's true."

"So what gives?"

"This is all oh-so precarious. But you know, after watching her fight like that without any pause at all, I must say she understands the limits of her stamina well. Though she seems to have forgotten the dangers of fighting on thin ice like this. Even if she isn't just a human, she's the child of one, after all..."

Hearing Rumeya's words, something finally clicked for Gaius.

"Ah, yeah, I see what you mean."

"You understand?" Weitzer asked, puzzled.

"Were you listening? At a glance, that little lady looks like she's fighting perfectly safely. It's true that those demons ain't shit to her, but it doesn't change the fact that she's running wild without any concern for her own wellbeing. Just look at the way she's fighting without any concern for defense. She can't even think of it right now she's so focused. But if she keeps this up, it'll only get more dangerous. That's why you're supposed to keep your head on in a

fight. But not this little lady here...”

“My goodness, to think I didn’t see through this earlier... Is this also because that boy was near Lefi?” Rumeya wasn’t speaking to anyone in particular as she mumbled to herself with an anxious look in her eyes. “I’m going to go support her. The lot from the guild all know a thing or two about tactics, so you can command them as you like, Your Highness.”

With that, Rumeya ran off towards Lefille. Meanwhile, Felmenia and Liliana were elsewhere on the battlefield dealing with a different group of demons.

“It is about time we made a big move ourselves. Lily, please take care of the demons who get close.”

“Understood.”

With that, Felmenia carefully began to fire off magicka while avoiding the Alliance soldiers who were fighting. Unlike the right flank where Lefille and the others had the demons completely overwhelmed, the left flank was losing ground. The far left side had collapsed altogether. The plan, then, was to pierce through the demons’ flank and take care of the ones who were pinning down the soldiers on the front.

Naturally, Felmenia was using her signature magic. Just as she burned down the demons before, she wrapped them up in a brilliant flash of white fire. The soldiers were surprised at the powerful support they were receiving from behind. Felmenia glanced over her shoulder at Selphy.

“It was Fittney-dono, correct?”

“Y-Yes.”

After watching the mysterious white flame, Selphy’s eyes were open wide. It was a spell she had never seen before this day. She was still gripped by both surprise and admiration. Felmenia then gave her instructions.

“When you next use your magic, please add on the words I am about to say to the end of your normal chant. Eva—no—Olgo, Luciula, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron.”

“Olgo, Luciula...?”

Selphy made a puzzled expression like she didn’t really understand. Liliana then questioned Felmenia’s decision.

“Felmenia, is it okay... to teach her?”

“There should be no problem. More importantly, it is essential that we defeat the demons before us. As such, it would be

regrettable to leave Fittney-dono's power unused."

In the current situation where the demons had the upper hand, even the power of a single mage might make the difference between life and death. And a talented mage was a particularly welcome boon. Selphy raised a timid voice, still completely perplexed.

"Um, just what are those words...?"

"They are called savage names. It is a supplementary chant that increases the effects of magic. If you add it on to the end of your regular chant, it will drastically increase the destructive power of that particular spell."

"That kind of thing exists?!"

"Yes. It is just as you saw with my magic just now."

Selphy looked between Felmenia's face and the demons who were still being burned by her white flame. Liliana then lightly tugged on Selphy's robe.

"It's... Olgo, Luciula, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron. But you can't... teach these words... to anyone else."

The reason they didn't share the same savage names Suimei and Felmenia used was because they were difficult for the people of this world to pronounce correctly without practicing. But, excited at the prospect of these words increasing the power of her magic, Selphy held her breath. From her tense expression, Felmenia and Liliana could tell that she was still somewhat skeptical, but she began to chant the spell for her snowstorm regardless.

"Oh Wind. Thou art the evil gale that carries the kiss of the frozen glacier. Blow violently, grow strong, and trap my enemy within your superb cage. No one and nothing escapes your icy prison, a baptism of the snowstorm. Olgo, Luciula, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron! Ephemeral Razing!"

After her keyword, her magic activated without a problem. However, due to the unexpected amount of mana and force it unleashed, for a short time, Selphy was unable to control it well and it began to run wild. However, as expected of a titled mage, she quickly regained control of it and focused its destructive power on the demons. The scale of the storm of snow and ice could not even be compared to the version she'd used on Suimei. This was a blizzard of pure death.

"A-Amazing..."

It did not reach the destructive power of Felmenia's magicka, but it was still more potent than any single spell a mage could

ordinarily conjure. It was a splendid performance. Continuing to get such powerful support from the rear, the soldiers at front fought bravely and without worry for the flank. Seeing the power of the magic from her own hands, however, Selphy stood there dumbfounded for a short while. Felmenia flashed a bit of a smile.

“That was amazing, but...”

“If it were Suimei...” added Liliana. “He could fire off that much... without savage names... and with both eyes closed.”

Selphy hung her head.

“As expected, it’s best to leave it to him for now, huh...?”

The depressed groan she let out sounded like frustration.

“Are you worried about the hero?” Felmenia asked curiously.

“Yes. Though it is presumptuous, I think of Hatsumi like a little sister.”

“Is that so...?”

Felmenia and Liliana were unaware of it, but just as Selphy said, she and Hatsumi were close. After being summoned to this world, Hatsumi hadn’t known right from left or even the first thing about herself. Selphy was the one who’d taken care of her and helped her acclimate, so she felt a strong bond with Hatsumi.

“Besides, because of my failure, Hatsumi’s memories...”

That also weighed heavily on her. Selphy felt that her ineptitude as a summoner was the reason Hatsumi had lost her memories. She felt responsible. Felmenia was able to sympathize there.

“Fittney-dono, I understand your feelings. When I did the hero summoning ritual in Astel, Suimei-dono and Mizuki-dono... I ended up summoning over people who never should have been involved.”

“Then... that was the accident that happened during Astel’s summoning?”

“Yes.”

Felmenia looked down as she replied, but soon looked back up with a determined gaze.

“I am sure you are worried about your hero, but you can count on Suimei-dono.”

“If it’s him... he’ll bring back the hero... very soon.”

Felmenia and Liliana both reassured Selphy, which helped put her a little at ease. She redirected her feelings into her staff, and began using her magic to support the soldiers again. Seeing her newfound resolution, Felmenia muttered to no one in particular.

“I must do my best too.”

“Felmenia?”

“I am still quite inadequate. If I am to be of use to Suimei-dono, I must be diligent.”

With that, Felmenia once more began chanting her spells too.

Chapter 4: Hunt the Moon

After separating from her companions at the fortress, Hatsumi wasn't quite sure just where she had run to. Since she was within a forest, it was probable that she had entered territory that was under the demons' sphere of influence.

She had been running, cutting down the demons in front of her as well as the ones who were pursuing her hot on her heels. It was like they were popping up at every turn, so she just kept running. And before she knew it, it started to get dark and her visibility dropped dramatically.

This evening, there should have been a crescent moon in the sky. But likely because of the tree cover overhead, it seemed far darker than it should. It was nearly pitch black in the woods. The deep blue and dark grey leaves hung from the branches overhead, and the bark of the darkwood trees made it look like they'd been painted with a coat of pure night. Despite there being a fair amount of space between trees, the darkness gave the impression the forest was much denser than it was.

Because Hatsumi had seen a map of the region before, she was at least aware of the general area she was in. But it seemed she'd headed in the opposite direction of Alliance territory, meaning it might be difficult to escape the demons' lands even if she found her way out of the forest. Thinking back on it, it was like the demons had specifically targeted her. They persistently hounded her and drove her this way, which meant...

"This was their aim from the very beginning..."

Everything that happened was all their scheme. She'd thought it was a plan to attract and disperse Alliance troops, but in truth, they were only aiming for the hero's life. Nothing else was important.

If a human stronghold was floundering, the hero would no doubt come to save them. Because the hero could do the work of several units, sending her was a simple and efficient solution. But the demons used that against them. That was exactly what they wanted.

First, they kept the main Alliance army busy by preparing a large force of similar scale in plain view and sending detachments to attack other fortresses. Said detachments were intentionally insufficient to actually take the fortresses, except for the one where they meant to lure the hero. Everything was lying in wait there. The moment the hero sortied from the fortress, the demons came out in force.

Hatsumi knew from the beginning that something must be going on. That's why they'd prepared a sufficient amount of forces and gathered careful intelligence. They just hadn't been able to deduce what the demons' real goal was, and that was a fatal error. They'd mistakenly assumed the demons were plotting to go after the Alliance's main army, leaving them unprepared for a trap like this.

Using an obvious plan as a decoy, they'd specifically targeted the hero. They'd known that by creating a dire situation at one of the fortresses, the humans had two options: either send reinforcements or abandon it. Sending even a large number of reinforcements seemed pointless against the number of demons plaguing it, but there was no way she could simply abandon her allies. That left them with no recourse but to send the hero herself. It was too bad she was only realizing this now.

"I see..."

After discerning the truth behind it all, she suddenly lost strength in her body. Just like that, she crouched down at the base of a tree. And then, like she was embracing herself, she curled up into a small ball. Her judgment may have been clouded by her victories up until now. Because she'd never lost to the demons, she never questioned that she could keep fighting. She was aware that there were demons who could come up with strategies, and she'd been careful about that.

No, even if she thought she'd been careful, it turned out that wasn't the case. Being blind to the truth was no different from being ignorant of it. Her foresight was shallow. Battles couldn't be won on strength alone.

"'Come with me,' huh...?"

Suddenly, she recalled what Yakagi Suimei had said to her on that evening. With things as they were, she began wondering if it would have been better to have just taken his hand honestly at the time. Without making a show of courage, if she had just taken her

responsibilities as hero and the pangs of guilt she felt from walking away from the fight and just cast them to the wind, she probably wouldn't be alone and scared like this.

"There's no reason why you have to fight them, right?"

Just as Suimei had said, she was summoned here against her will. On top of that, she had lost her memory. She had no real reason to fight here. Contemplating all this, Hatsumi shook her head vigorously. She was just making excuses. She'd swung her sword of her own free will and acted completely on her own, so what was there to gain by acting uninvolved now? She would simply have to live with the consequences of her own actions.

"..."

However, even so, the pain in her heart only grew stronger. It was because she was all alone in this pitch darkness. No, that wasn't the only reason that her painful feelings of loneliness were swelling up. She'd been lonely ever since coming to this world. Even though she would smile for the people around her, it wasn't a genuine smile from her heart. As long as she didn't know who she was, that was something that would never happen.

That was perhaps the sole reason she'd really fought up until now. She was filled with loneliness and anxiety, but when she swung her sword, it was like she could cut herself away from those emotions. That's why she believed that she was unconsciously trying to liberate herself by fighting.

Yet, somehow... that anxiety had now slightly weakened. Why was that? It was because there was someone who knew who she was, and that made her feel at ease. He said he was family. A cousin. A close friend. It was embarrassing to talk about, but in this place where nobody was around, those words rang in her heart.

Someone was thinking about her. Someone was waiting for her. She knew all that because of Suimei, so just knowing him had eased her anxiety. As she shut her eyes in the darkness, she could see her dreams playing on the back of her eyelids—dreams of her playing with a young boy that were probably memories of her childhood. They would play hide-and-go-seek together. If only he'd come to try and find her now...

"Good grief, so this is where you were hiding?"

Yes, just like that, completely out of nowhere...

"Huh—?"

"Yo. You look a little worse for wear."

Hatsumi turned towards the voice she heard and doubted her eyes. For standing before her was Yakagi Suimei's figure. She couldn't see him well in the darkness, but she recognized his voice. It really was like he'd appeared out of nowhere.

"Yakagi?! Really?! You're kidding..."

"Y-Yakagi...?"

Suimei frowned. He wasn't used to her calling him by his family name. And Hatsumi wasn't used to seeing him dressed like this—he was in a black suit rather than the green clothes he'd worn before.

"Why are you here...?"

"Isn't it obvious? I came to find you. See, I heard you left to fight the demons, then went missing in a retreat or something. I'll worry about the details later."

"Ah, yeah..."

Hearing him say that, her face suddenly felt hot. To distract him from her reddening cheeks, she changed the subject.

"Y-You were wearing a suit when you were summoned?"

"No, I was actually wearing my school uniform. But I can whip this out anytime the occasion calls for it."

"Being a mage sure is handy, isn't it?"

"A magician—not the same as the magic users of this world."

Hatsumi didn't quite understand how they were different, but Suimei didn't dwell on it. He then pulled an old-fashioned lantern from the bag he was carrying.

"So, I'm gonna turn on a light, okay?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

"W-Wait! If you do that, won't the demons find us?!"

"Maybe, but who cares? Isn't it a little dark for you here?"

"But..."

"Darkness wears out your nerves. Just being unable to see properly is a bundle of anxiety. I guess it might not be if you're already blind, but it's kind of a mood-killer. And if demons suddenly came and attacked, wouldn't it be fatal if your concentration was compromised?"

Suimei didn't wait for her to agree. She didn't know what kind of trick he used, but after poking the lantern with his finger, a warm orange light came on within the glass container. The source of the light was rather small, but it provided as much illumination as an open flame. And with that, Hatsumi could finally see Suimei

clearly. Just as he said, she immediately felt a little better.

“Now then, show me where you’re hurt.”

“Can you heal it?”

“I’m a magician, remember?”

As he spoke in a reliable and refreshing tone, Hatsumi showed him the cuts on her arms and legs. Quite a few of them were deep, but thanks to the divine protection from the hero summoning, they had already healed to the point that they weren’t too serious. Suimei recited one or two words, and a green magic circle appeared in the palm of his hand. It let out a faint light that shone on the cuts on her arm. She could feel a gentle warmth from it. Before long, when he pulled his hand away, her cuts were gone without a trace.

As he continued healing her other wounds, she started imitating his words as she hummed to herself. This was just the good luck charm he used in her dreams. The smile he gave her as he finished her treatment was the same, too. But it seemed he’d healed more than just her cuts—the anxiety constricting her heart was long gone. Seeing the subtle change in her expression, Suimei gave her a worried look.

“What’s wrong? Are you alright? Do you wanna take a rest before we move?”

“Let’s go. I’d rather not stay here forever.”

The kindness he was showing her was somehow embarrassing, so she abruptly turned away from him. He looked flabbergasted.

“What is it?” she asked.

“N-Nothing. It’s just, after being healed, you’re suddenly full of energy... is all. That part of you is exactly the same as before you lost your memories.”

“Hmph... Well excuse me for being a tomboy.”

Hatsumi sounded irritated. For some reason, him thinking of her that way bothered her. Suimei, however, was chuckling like he was quite pleased.

“Well then, shall we go?”

“Do you know the way back?”

“I can tell which way is north at least. We’ll figure it out.”

“That’s so haphazard...”

But right now, there wasn’t much else they could do. There was a possibility they would bump into demons along the way, but if they remained where they were, they would just be sitting ducks. And since it seemed Hatsumi was ready to go again, it was better to

get on the move. Her miraculous recovery of energy could be attributed to the Goddess's blessing, but it was likely only now that her anxieties had been dispelled that she was really feeling the effects of it. Like this, even if demons did appear, she could fight well enough.

Holding up his lantern, Suimei began to walk. Even though he was walking through thickets, he cut down anything that was in the way skillfully with magic and created a path for them. Hatsumi followed after him, focusing on the orange outline of his shadow drawn by the light from his lantern.

"These are pretty sturdy trees, huh?" he said.

"They are apparently called darkwood. They grow here in the north, and I've heard they're used for weapons and things."

"Yeah, I think I've heard of this before..."

Suimei spoke in an admiring tone. In spite of the critical situation, he didn't seem to be carrying an ounce of tension. Somewhat astonished at his behavior, Hatsumi asked him about something that was on her mind.

"Hey, did you meet with Selphy and the others on the way here?"

"Yeah, I did. I had my companions stay with them. Right now, they're probably all taking it easy. I didn't ask for details, but it looked like they all had their units with them."

"I see, thank goodness... They got away safely."

Another of Hatsumi's worries vanished in a sigh of relief. It was a blessing that her companions were all safe. But if what she suspected was true, the demons likely hadn't pursued them very hard. And just as she was thinking about it, Suimei brought up the same thing.

"But to think only you would come all the way here..."

"It's probable that their true aim was me alone. That's why I ended up here."

"Huh...?"

Suimei furrowed his brow, trying to read between the lines. Hatsumi then briefly explained her theory about what had really happened and why. After quietly listening, Suimei nodded.

"I get it. Because they were only really after you, the others were able to get away easily."

"I suspect so. It's just conjecture based on how things turned out, but if we think about it that way, their strategy makes sense."

After walking alongside Suimei for a while, deep within the darkness in front of them, Hatsumi could see a pale blue light illuminating the trees.

“It’s bright over there...”

It was probably a patch of moonlight coming through the trees. After Hatsumi quietly pointed it out, Suimei turned his lantern towards it.

“Shall we take a look?”

After Hatsumi agreed, they cut through the underbrush and came upon a strange area with enormous stones lined up. The woods were filled with massive darkwood trees, but it seemed they’d been cleared out of this area specifically. Moonbeams rained down from the gap in the canopy overhead. Enormous stones lay here and there, worn and chipped from years of natural wear. Their positions, however, indicated they’d been placed by human hands.

It looked different from ruins scattered about the Alliance. And bathed in moonlight, it was almost like the whole thing was being lifted up in the air. It was like it was all from a different time and place.

“What’s this? Ruins?”

“Looks like it, but...”

As he muttered in response to Hatsumi’s question, Suimei took a closer look. But he came to a dead stop when he was able to see the center of the rocks clearly.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is...”

He didn’t answer her. But rather than ignoring her, it seemed like he hadn’t even heard her. When she looked at his face, he appeared to be somewhere between surprised and outright stunned. After he carefully walked around the clearing, he began muttering once more.

“To think it was all the way out here...”

Suimei seemed to come to some sort of strange understanding. There was a hint of excitement in his voice. As Hatsumi also drew closer and looked around for herself, she saw exactly what he had.

A magic circle was drawn neatly in the center of the enormous stones. In the middle of it was a reversed triangular shape. The words inscribed in it were in the language of this world. And despite being here for what was probably ages, the paint used to draw it looked like freshly drawn blood.

“Isn’t this... the magic circle for summoning heroes?”

“Yeah. There are a few minor differences between this and the one I saw in Astel, but there’s no mistaking it.”

“But why is it out here?”

“I told you before that I came here to look for a way back, right? That’s because I heard that the first hero summoning ritual was performed somewhere in Alliance territory.”

“So this is the clue you were looking for?”

“Yeah, this was my goal. But really, to think I would find it out here... To find it at a time like this is really something...”

Suimei let out a hardy laugh and shrugged his shoulders.

“Hey, does that mean that if we use this, we can return to our world?”

“Hmm? ’Fraid not. We can’t return with this thing. This is just a circle for calling things over. To get back, I need to get a good reading of this bad boy and make a new teleportation magicka circle based on it.”

“How tedious.”

“Don’t say that. It’s different from sci-fi warp devices and wormholes and portals and all that, you know.”

Suimei rebuked her while listing off a number of other options that sounded quite convenient. They were all things Hatsumi felt like she should know, but didn’t understand. As expected, talking to someone from her own world was a different experience.

“So, sorry, but you’re gonna have to wait a bit.”

“What? Y-You mean you’re going to take a look now?!”

“I’ll be quick. I’ll just transcribe the circle and examine it in a jiffy.”

The young mage eagerly approached the object of his curiosity. She had no idea what he was thinking, considering demons could set upon them at any time. He then started to gather his mana. Unlike when he turned on the lantern, this was being released in the open.

“Seriously? The demons will notice...”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

Suimei didn’t pay her any mind and simply continued to ooh and aah over the circle as he cast his spell.

“Wait, that’s not it, right?! You’re not going out of your way to get their attention, are you?!”

“No, I just don’t really care.”

“How can you say that so calmly?! Do you understand the situation we’re in right now?! Do you really and truly understand?!”

“What’re you getting pissed about? Calm down. It’s fine. It’s not like I don’t get it.”

“Wha... What?”

His reaction was so casual that Hatsumi was completely thrown off. Suimei then turned to her with a troubled expression as he scratched his head. He sighed like he was resigning himself to something and the air around him suddenly turned cold like it had that night at the palace. Hatsumi unconsciously held her breath, and then Suimei’s eyes shined red.

“You said earlier that you were entrapped by the demons, right? That the demons were only after you because you’re the hero, and that that was their plan all along.”

“Th-That’s what I’m thinking... Why do you ask?”

“If they went out of their way to plan something like that, the goal would have been to take you out once you were isolated. So I find it hard to believe that they’d only send small fries after you. To make sure things are taken care of, they’d send a demon general.”

“That’s...”

Hatsumi had had the same thought. She’d defeated a demon general on her own already, so it would take a demon at least as powerful to even challenge her. So just as Suimei said, it was inevitable they’d send a general after her.

“But what does that have to do with getting us noticed?”

“Well, just listen. I’m saying a demon general is currently in the middle of looking for you. There’s an eight or nine chance out of ten it’s the same guy who set this trap up in the first place... So we have two options from here: run away, or stay and fight.” Suimei paused there a moment before continuing. “It may be fine for you not to defeat said demon general yet. It’s a valid choice to run away now and gamble on encountering him again after you rally. But, personally speaking, I have a good reason to take him out here and now.”

“Wh-Why is that?”

“It’s not out of the realm of possibilities that said demon general will trap you in another scheme next time. And there’s no guarantee I’ll be around then. So, as far as I’m concerned, this guy’s gotta go.”

In spite of his casual and slightly joking tone, his words were earnest and passionate. Hatsumi felt like his shining red eyes were telling her that he meant to protect her.

“That’s the reason we’re not running away in a hurry. Do you think I’m being imprudent?”

“N-No... I understand.”

Expecting that they might meet gazes at any moment, Hatsumi quickly looked down. She couldn’t look him in the eye right now. If she looked directly into those eyes shining with determination, she thought her heart would be seized in an instant.

The reason she avoided him so was ultimately because of her amnesia. She didn’t know what kind of feelings she’d held for this man before, or whether it was okay for her heart to be seized by him. She spent a quiet moment pondering such things. But after speaking of his resolve, Suimei returned to his investigation. Hatsumi watched him from behind.

Just like when he infiltrated the palace, he’d come for her sake. He wasn’t looking for any compensation. He demanded nothing. All as if it was the completely natural thing for him to do. It left her with one resounding question.

“...Why?”

“...?”

“Why do you go so far for me?”

“Didn’t I tell you already? You’re family. That’s why...”

“I get that. I know that we’re cousins, but is that really the only reason?”

“The only reason...?”

“I’m saying, are you and me...”

Just as she was about to ask, the leaves and branches in the forest suddenly began rustling. They both could feel the very air around them get prickly. From a distance, they could hear the sound of footsteps and flapping wings, and they could sense an eerie presence.

“So they showed up...”

It was exactly as he said. The demons had been completely lured in by the bait he spread by scattering around his mana. As the rustling of the forest suddenly came to a stop, the repulsive figures of demons appeared between the trees. Perhaps because of the ruins, none of them showed up from the rear, but they still had Suimei and Hatsumi half-surrounded.

“...”

Hatsumi silently took a stance. As she took a fleeting glimpse to the side, Suimei was standing next to her with his hands in the pockets of his slacks. The demons were showing no signs they were about to attack. Normally, the moment they found a human, they would lunge in immediately. But these were only baring their fangs and hostility. They were like dogs awaiting permission to dig into a meal.

Before long, something wearing a black robe with golden embroidery on the fringes stepped out in the middle of the line of demons. Its figure made it look human at first glance, but the robe it was wearing concealed nothing but a pitch black haze. This was no human.

But unlike the other demons, it didn't give off the impression it was waiting for anything. In fact, this was who the other demons seemed beholden to. It was likely this was the demon general. Its red eyes shined like fire in the darkness. Having anticipated its arrival, Suimei questioned it in a somewhat listless tone.

“So... you a demon general?”

In response to his question, a voice came out of the unsettling black robe that was floating in the air.

“I am called Vuishta, and I have been entrusted with one of the seven demon armies. It is a pleasure to meet you, hero who has received blessings from the wretched Goddess.”

He spoke in a haughty tone, really only taunting and belittling Hatsumi. But nevertheless, he seemed to have absolute faith in his own words.

“The one next to you does not seem to have any of the characteristics of the people described in the reports, but are you one of the hero's companions?”

“Nope. I'm a relative.”

“...”

The demon general—Vuishta—must have found this to be a completely incomprehensible reply. And he was rightfully confused after hearing someone claiming to be a relative of a hero summoned from another world. It made no sense. Suddenly, Vuishta began laughing.

“I received a report that we had lost sight of you and panicked a little, but you really saved us the trouble of searching for you. After all, as if to announce that you were here, you have been

scattering such obvious mana.”

“So using my powers turned out to be fruitful, huh? Well, that’s good. How about you give me a reward for the trouble?”

“Yes, of course. I will compensate you with blood. Heh heh heh...”

Vuishta let out an eerie laugh, but in complete contrast, Suimei was completely silent. Hatsumi then turned to him to criticize him.

“Just why are you going along with this?”

“Don’t be so tense. It’s fine to play around a little, right? But I guess this kinda guy doesn’t really fall for being stirred up, huh?”

“Hmph...”

It sounded like Suimei was really trying to size up the demon. Rather than playing around, he was just being sly. Next, Hatsumi questioned Vuishta.

“Are you the one who thought up this scheme?”

“That’s right. Hero of the Alliance, you are strong. That is why I thought to take you down with a clever ploy.”

“And this is how you chose to do it?”

“Yes, you all managed to defeat Mauhario. I figured you would grow overconfident after that, making it easier to entrap you in such a way. It just means it was worthwhile stirring him up.”

“You... used your own allied general?”

With that, Hatsumi realized the full extent of the scheme. This demon general had no qualms about using his own allies as pawns. And just as expected, Vuishta began laughing.

“That is incorrect. Mauhario simply exhausted himself for his allies’ sake.”

“You scum...”

With clear disgust in her voice, Hatsumi pointed the tip of her sword at the black-robed demon. She was pointing her bloodlust at him, but he was not agitated at all. After she took a step forward, Suimei called after her in a somewhat perplexed tone.

“Uh, Hatsumi...”

“I’ll take the front. Please take care of the other demons.”

“No, I’ll take this guy.”

He likely felt responsible for taking the general down since he’d been the one to attract him. But Hatsumi couldn’t stand for taking a backseat while someone else protected her. A swordsman’s spirit flowed through her veins. It was telling her to defeat the opponent before her. She couldn’t entrust that to someone else. After they

quickly exchanged looks as she glanced back at him, Suimei seemed to understand how she felt. Or perhaps just gave up on trying to convince her otherwise. After letting out quite a sigh, Suimei stepped back.

“Got it. I’ll do something about the guys in the area first.”

With those words, Suimei’s mana swelled up considerably. Sensing this, Vuishta brought his eerie laughter to an end and raised his arm.

“Now, get them!”

Swinging down his arm and giving out his command, the demons sprung to action all at once. However, even with them all pouncing, Hatsumi didn’t feel like she was in any particular danger. It was the same as always. These demons attacked like a mob every single time. They were just like wild beasts being thrown a piece of meat. No, that’s exactly what they were.

Normal humans didn’t have the means to deal with a mob springing on them. But skilled individuals had strategies and techniques for all kinds of situations, including this.

It would be vital to cut the demons down quickly before they could completely surround her and truly gang up on her. When surrounded by enemies, instead of defending, there was a swordsman in the past who said it was always better to go on the offensive. Hatsumi’s memory was hazy and she couldn’t remember their name, but she had no problem putting such wisdom into practice.

Before the demons came into range, Hatsumi dashed forward like a gale towards the nearest one. The demon had no time to be surprised at her footwork, which reduced the distance between them to nothing in an instant. Before its expression could even change, its head was already tumbling on the ground. And then, without losing any momentum, Hatsumi moved on to the next demon. She leaped towards the one who was in the middle of reacting to the first being cut down. Seeing that this demon was taller than she was, Hatsumi thrust out her right arm out and stabbed at its face.

Against a large number of enemies, a thrust was a very poor choice of move. It was a powerful technique, but required pulling the blade back afterward, which could leave the attacker open and delay their next move.

However, that was no issue for the skilled Hatsumi. After

stabbing the demon in the face, she simply leaned in and drove the blade in further. Disregarding the spray of blood, meat, and grey matter, she slashed her blade out through the side of the demon's head to attack the next one.

In a single breath, the next demon was rent into five pieces. There was a spray of blood. There would only be an instant before it cleared. Just a single moment. As if everything was moving in slow motion to her, Hatsumi placed her large sword on her shoulder, and—determined to decapitate all of demons in a single line—swung it with all her might.

After her powerful slash, everything reverted to regular speed for Hatsumi as every demon was blown away. That was the last of them. She'd taken down at least one with every swing of her sword.

But it was dull. The demons were hardly a match for her. Like an unyielding geyser, she was overflowing with power.

Remaining vigilant of Vuishta's movements, Hatsumi began worrying about Suimei. He was also surrounded by demons that were leaping at him just like they had with her. And Suimei was slow to react—he had yet to make his move. But he was completely composed just like the night he first came to the palace. There were somewhere around ten demons lunging at him, and he had nowhere to run. It seemed like there wasn't enough time for him to deal with them all, but...

Every last demon and even the ground beneath them burst.

"Amazing..." Hatsumi unwittingly muttered.

Suimei had held his hand like a blade and swung it out in a horizontal line. The moment he raised his fingers to the sky, the demons were all swallowed in an explosion of flames. The man standing at the center of the explosions had an open stance and moved in a relaxed manner. It was a frightening, casual power. It was like he was the god of fire himself.

As she thought, he was quite skilled. She had seen magic used in battle against the demons several times already, but this was on a completely different level. Suimei then turned his composed gaze on Vuishta.

"At this level, no matter how many of them you let loose at us, you'll never defeat us, you know?"

"That is... until they drain your mana and stamina, no?"

As Vuishta declared this, a massive number of demons began to appear from within the forest.

“Nothing but small fries swarming like bugs...”

“Heh heh, then please keep these small fries company for me. I must attend to the hero.”

While letting out another eerie laugh, Vuishta turned to Hatsumi. It seemed he intended to come at her immediately. Paying close attention to his movements, she charged at him first.

Flying demons came at her from the right and left as she ran. She swung her large sword at them, and in a single breath, took both of them down. She then took aim at Vuishta. But just like Suimei, Vuishta’s movements were composed. She was getting an ominous feeling from his figure just floating there.

Going around and cutting in from the left, Hatsumi extended her large sword while her opponent extended his claws clad in an evil violet aura. She took a swing with her sword from the side, but he dodged it. As she thought, the demon general was different from the small fries. Like a piece of paper blowing wildly in the wind, her blade didn’t even graze Vuishta’s robe.

“Ugh...”

Seeing this fight wasn’t going to end so simply, Hatsumi let out a slightly bitter groan as she leaped back. She then prepared to take on Vuishta’s attack that would be coming at her, but suddenly, a purple flash came flying in from behind her.

“Ngh!”

Escaping the purple flash, Vuishta’s black robe lightly fluttered as he fell back a great distance. It was a spell fired off by Suimei, who was currently still facing down a large number of demons.

“Yakagi!”

“Seems he can do something useful...”

Instead of replying, Suimei kept his eyes locked on Hatsumi. But not for long. His attention soon returned to the demons who’d resumed their attack on him. Using fire and lightning, he continuously shot down one after the other.

Suimei was supporting her from the back. On top of facing off against the demons surrounding her, he was paying attention to Hatsumi’s fight and keeping Vuishta in check.

He really is quite capable...

While fighting off a constant stream of ten or more demons, no normal human would be able to concentrate on anything else, much less provide covering fire. Hatsumi was left suspecting that his sight, hearing, and other senses were ten times as keen as what a

normal human possessed.

But she had to focus on her own battle too.

“HYAAAAAH!”

Hatsumi attacked Vuishta as she unleashed her fighting spirit. She couldn’t easily hit him, but she continued to attack as she linked her sword techniques together in a chain. Before her incessant flurry of attacks, Vuishta eventually slowed, unable to keep up with her movements.

Now!

Using that opening, Hatsumi slashed down from his right shoulder to his left hip in the blink of an eye. She didn’t yell as she let out her killing blow. The fighting spirit held in her struck silently. Just as she planned, her sword cut right through Vuishta’s body. However...

“Huh—? Urgh!”

Hatsumi caught a glimpse of a violet aura coming at her and backed away immediately. Right after she finished swinging her sword, in no time at all, Vuishta’s was swiping at her with his evil claws.

“You dodged that well. I intended to kill you with that just now.”

“What are you saying so hastily?!”

She was stunned for an instant by the unexpected event, but she immediately yelled back as she swung her sword. This time, Vuishta did not move in the slightest or make any attempts to evade, as if telling her that he had no need to do so. And indeed, her large sword cut through the darkness without any resistance at all.

“What’s the matter? You won’t be able to defeat me with that sort of attack, you know.”

“That can’t be! My sword definitely...”

Her aim was true. But in spite of that, it was like she’d swiped through pure air. In a fluster over this mysterious turn of events, she let her guard down some. Suimei then yelled at her from behind.

“Hatsumi! Move!”

“Hup!”

Reacting to his voice, Hatsumi swiftly jumped back a great distance. Not a moment later, she could hear the satisfying sound of Suimei snapping his fingers, which quickly transformed into the sound of a large explosion. The air in front of Vuishta detonated.

There was no way the shockwave hadn't hit him, but as if nothing happened at all, his black robe was still lightly swaying in the air.

"...Huh?"

"What's the matter? That level of magic won't work on me, you know."

"..."

Suimei didn't respond to such provocation. Disregarding the demons who were lunging at him from behind, he simply glared at Vuishta in silence...

"Huh—?"

Suimei's figure suddenly vanished like smoke and the demons lost their target. When Hatsumi spotted him, he was already standing behind those bewildered demons. Next, a great number of magic circles took shape suspended in the night sky.

"Wai...?!"

Looking at the magic circles that seemed to be filling the night sky to capacity, Hatsumi reflexively raised her voice in a fluster. She knew it was the work of an ally, but it still boggled her mind.

"Illustre carmen ad operationem maximam. Armat ad centum et juctum diducit, invocato Augoeides. Carpet Bombing!"

[Illustrious spell at maximum operation. Arm from one to a hundred and deploy serially, invoke Augoeides. Carpet Bombing!]

A flash of light was fired from the numerous magic circles filling the night sky. As the light impacted the ground, it exploded with a violent flash. The demons and Vuishta had nowhere to run, and everything in a wide area was blown away. It was indeed a magical carpet bombing.

Surely there was no way the demons had survived. Hatsumi shuddered at the thought of facing a spell so powerful, but quickly put it out of her mind as the afterimage of the light burned into her eyes vanished. Vuishta was still there.

"Heh heh heh heh heh..."

"No way!"

All of the winged demons had completely vanished, but Vuishta looked untouched. He was simply quietly laughing with an air of excitement. Suimei's attack just now didn't even leave a three centimeter gap anywhere for a mouse to escape. Even the sturdy darkwood trees in the area were cruelly blown away or toppled over. The storm of light was so intense that there were even chunks of earth blown out of the ground. But nevertheless, Vuishta was

unharmd. As if nothing had happened at all, his robe was still lightly fluttering midair. Suimei beheld this and let out a troubled groan.

“Even high-order magicka doesn’t work...? Wasn’t the one just now good enough to annihilate the others? No, it’s just that the magicka didn’t piece his body...”

Hatsumi could hear him speaking in a perplexed voice with a couple of technical terms mixed in. It seemed he was also unaware of the reason why their attacks weren’t working on Vuishta. Despite his bewilderment, Suimei once more opened his mouth.

“Mea acies est facta invisibilis, sed est instar adamantinum acre, et demergit meus inimicum in sanguis. Abripit in atomos!”

[My blade is invisibly made, however with sharpness like steel, it drowns my enemy in a pool of blood. Blow away into atoms!]

As Vuishta was about to take action, Suimei fired off his next spell. Right as his chant came to an end, the darkwood trees, the ground, and the scattered stones were all abruptly torn to pieces and blown away. Hatsumi couldn’t tell whether they were blades made of air or just invisible blades, but everything in the surroundings were being shredded as the tempest of invisible slashes continued with no signs of stopping. Vuishta was concealed among the kicked-up dust and wood chips. But Suimei wasn’t going to relent until the entire area had been leveled. This time for sure...

“With this...!”

“Nope, this is just the opening performance.”

“Huh?”

Just as Suimei spoke, an invisible power pulled Hatsumi’s body over to his side. After landing next to him, within the sandstorm of wood chips, she could see a thin fire similar to a red string cutting through it. Before long, a bright red monster was born within the sandstorm of wood chips. It swelled, and then everything exploded. But neither the heat nor the shockwave from the blast reached her. Suimei was likely intercepting it. Both of them were unharmd, but...

“C-Could this be... a dust explosion?!”

In complete contrast to Hatsumi’s surprised expression, Suimei was indifferently staring at the fire as if nothing was happening. Not only had he cast the spell, but he’d used its power to make a clever attack like this. Thinking of how he’d intentionally created the phenomenon sent chills down Hatsumi’s spine. But even with all

that, as the smoke subsided, Vuishta was in perfect health.

“So he can’t be blown away either... Huh.”

As if accepting that reality, Suimei’s irked voice rang in the now still air. But he said not a word after that. Even though Vuishta was acting defenseless, he didn’t chant another spell.

“Yakagi!”

“...”

Suimei did not reply. As if he gave up on defeating the enemy before him, he simply stood there with his head hung down.



The hero’s expression grew more bitter and unpleasant as time passed. It was no wonder, either. No matter how much she slashed at Vuishta’s body with her sword, all her sword ever cut was air. It was so unusual and uncanny that Hatsumi’s cheeks burned in frustration.

The man had stopped using magic, and the hero was just recklessly swinging her sword. Despite not knowing why her blows weren’t connecting, she didn’t relent in her attacks. Her moves were fluent and mature. So much so that Mauharior’s were merely a child’s practice swings in comparison. If he let his mind wander too much, they had a beauty to them that might even captivate a demon. However, right now, it was all just recklessness. Her sword that carried no conviction that it would actually hit was simply too clouded. Naturally, even the clear blade of a confident sword master would never hit him.

As the hero swung around her sword, she exclaimed and cursed to herself. She probably wasn’t intending to do so, but impatience moved her mouth involuntarily.

Rotating her body, the hero’s sword drew a spiral in the air. The blade came in with plenty of power from the side, and Vuishta exposed himself to the blow. But he took it with no resistance whatsoever, and easily shook it off. It was like he was only pretending to be hit with it, and Hatsumi could only watch in natural confusion. This was the first time her blade had ever been rendered completely useless.

“This is pointless no matter how long you go at it. Your sword will never strike my body.”

“Ugh!”

Vuishta spoke as if remonstrating the hero as she let out a sort of groan. He was acting like her attacks didn't pose any threat at all to him after all, but even then, her attacks were too obvious now. This was how she'd defeated Mauharior. It wouldn't work against Vuishta, but it made dealing the decisive blow back to her difficult.

However, even the hero had her limits. As long as he kept sapping her will to fight, she would weaken along with her depleted stamina. She had been fighting continuously since the ambush at the fortress. She probably hadn't had any chance to rest. Right now she was panicking and slowly coming to an understanding. At this rate, she would die along with her will.

Just imagining the outcome, Vuishta was naturally filled with laughter. He was leading around an opponent by the nose who was supposed to pose a threat to the Demon Lord. Anyone would find it funny. It was simply such a delightful and pleasant feeling.

"Heh heh... It seems your breathing is starting to get ragged. How about giving up already?"

"You talk too much."

"Unfortunately, unlike you humans, I do not have a tongue to bite on, after all."

He began to corner the hero with his words. Humans were beings with weak hearts, no matter how strong their constitutions were. When their emotional strength was chipped away at, every single one of them was the same. They were delicate, fragile things.

Both Rajas and Lishbaum were well aware of this point as well. Aiming right at their weak spot, they could quash a human's fighting spirit right at the root and make things all too easy. Vuishta was reminded of what they'd said at each and every opportunity. And so...

"It is about time you gave up. Could you just graciously hand me your head?"

"Who would do that?!"

"The man behind you seems to have resigned himself already. While you've been swinging around your sword... Just look. Hasn't he just been standing there stock-still the whole time?"

"...Urgh!"

The moment he pointed out that man, the hero went pale enough that her face looked white. It was like imminent defeat was painted on her face. If he used that man against her, she would easily capitulate. He thought it was somewhat troublesome at first

that she had a companion present, but it turned out to be quite fortunate.

It was no wonder the hero stepped forward on her own and fought quite prominently, but the fact that she was relying on the man behind her was clear as day. She watched the man's face, and was using it to judge whether they were in a superior or inferior position. When she fought, she did so in a style that relied on his support. And then, after that man became completely silent, she broke into a sweat and became indecisive. Vuishta was confident of this fact.

While defeating Vuishta's brethren, that man provided precise support for the hero like it was natural. He was quite skilled, but in the end he was only human. He was merely entertainment. His magic wasn't enough to harm Vuishta—that was impossible. Probably not even Lishbaum, who taught him this technique, or even Demon Lord Nakshatra, could inflict a single wound on him.

At last, the hero's shoulders began to droop like she was losing hope. Perhaps she was finally realizing that she couldn't defeat him no matter what. She cast her gaze downwards, slumped her shoulders, and bit her lip bitterly. Seeing her like this now was too funny. It was like the fearsome girl at the start of the fight had just been a joke.

“Heh heh hehAH AHAHA!”

Unable to contain his joy, Vuishta poured his evil power into his claws. It would only be a few more moments. In mere seconds, he would take the hero's head and gain the honor of being the first to kill a hero. There was no longer anybody who could get in his—

“Aah, what the hell? So that's what it was?”

“...Wha?”

“...Huh?”

Two confused voices were simultaneously raised at that completely out of place voice. When Vuishta looked, the man who was standing stock-still before was now behind the hero and sighing with a stunned expression on his face. He looked like he'd come to a realization that should have only been obvious.

“I thought you were quite the difficult opponent to deal with, but now I totally get why attacks aren't working on you. Your real body isn't exposed here, so obviously there's no way an attack would really connect. Why the hell didn't I realize something so simple sooner? I'm a dumbass.”

The man in black clothing looked particularly perplexed—distracted, even. It was like his thoughts and concerns were somewhere far away from the battle Vuishta and the hero were having right in front of him.

Once he was done talking, Vuishta fired the evil power he had been gathering as a magic bullet at him. However, the man noticed it. He snapped his fingers and sent the attack flying off course with an explosion.

Up until now, he'd simply looked like he'd given up, but now he was eyeing Vuishta with the same bored expression he had in the beginning of the fight. Before he realized it, the hero had also dodged one of his attacks and leaped over to the man's side.

"Didn't you give up...?"

"Huh? What the hell are you talking about? Why would I give up in this kind of situation?"

"What...? You know, to survive, or something..."

"Nah. If we can't win, we just run. You... When you lost your memories, did you also lose some of your brains?"

"Who're you calling stupid?!"

The hero began yelling at the man. The man was snickering a bit, but his gaze was attentively directed at Vuishta. As Vuishta once more gathered his power for an attack, the man raised his hand once more. His ability to intercept was astounding. It would be difficult for Vuishta to get an attack in. The hero then pointed her sword at Vuishta as she spoke to the man once more.

"Did you figure it out?"

"Yeah. Seriously, I thought the guys in this world couldn't do that crap, but there's always an exception. There's a part of it that I'm a little curious about, but... Well, I'll just set that aside."

The man was speaking like he knew how to deal with Vuishta's technique somehow. Could it be more than just a bluff? Could he have actually figured it out? No, that was absolutely impossible.

"I don't know what you're talking about..." Vuishta said in a deep voice.

The man rolled his eyes and began speaking in a reserved fashion.

"Then should I just explain it simply? The reason attacks don't connect with you isn't because your physical existence has become ambiguous, but because the space itself you're occupying has become ambiguous, right?"

“...”

“It looks like your body becomes hazy, so at first I only thought you were turning into vapor or making your physical existence ambiguous. But, holy crap, to think that you had that kind of body from the beginning... It’s amazing. Well, you’re a demon after all, so anything goes, I guess.”

“...You are completely off the mark.”

“Quit lying this far into the game. I’ve fought a guy who used a similar technique to what you’re doing right now. Well, his was way better right out the gate, honestly.”

The man was confident that his conjecture was correct. Vuishta was unable to deceive him.

“...Fine then. You are correct. I offer you my praise for seeing through it. However, this technique cannot be overcome by anyone.”

“You wish. There are countless ways of dealing with it.”

The man had a smile on his face as he declared that. It was like someone had said something funny. And that condescending attitude, like he was sneering at Vuishta, greatly fanned his anger.

“There is no such—”

“I just told you there was. Pretending to be a know-it-all really is lame, you know?”

“Tch! What are you...? With that kind of bluff...”

“Ah, you think it’s a bluff, huh? Care to test me?”

Vuishta gathered the power in his hand once more, and it swelled up into the shape of a gigantic fist. As he swung it with all his might, uplifting the ground and sending a great shockwave at the man.

He would never be able to defend himself in time. It would even be too late for the hero by the time she reacted. However, even that underhanded play seemed to have been anticipated. The instant his attack was crashing into them, the man’s figure fizzled out. The next Vuishta knew, both he and the hero were now in a different location.

Just what did they do? Vuishta was unable to read when that man had used a spell. Even the hero, his companion, seemed baffled by this. She was looking around frantically. And then, that man quietly shut his eyes and began reciting words from memory like he was singing.

“He who reveals the truth. Open the gates of knowledge, the

third eye held by the Fool, and return all ignorance to the fate of the Earth. The purified soul of Jnanachakusya. Transcribe the ninety-six spokes revealed by them as two spheres and semi-circles, and draw them at my feet.”

The man’s chant resounded in the air. His mana grew agitated and poured out into the atmosphere surrounding him. The fierce wind created by his mana was systematically scouring the earth, and eventually, the man opened his eyes.

“Before the opened eye of Danguma, obliterate all falsehoods.”

Anything and everything in the area was drowned in a dazzling light that looked like it was reflecting off of a surface of water. However, that light immediately settled down, and just like before, the darkwood forest was only illuminated by the light of the crescent moon. Vuishta could not tell at all what effect the summoned light had. Nothing about his body had changed, and nothing about the surroundings had either. The hero also seemed to have realized this, and looked at the man with a puzzled expression.

“Yakagi...? That magic just now...”

“It’s done.”

The man was conceding. It had all been an act of desperation after all.

“Heh heh... AHAHAHA! What’s that?! Like I thought, it was just a bluff! Just as I thought that you were doing something truly over the top, nothing happened at all! Everything is the same as before!”

“Nope, that’s not true. Look. This over here is different, right?”

As the man declared this, he tapped the ground with the sole of his shoe. There were several circles drawn there with a pale glimmer that looked like they were imitating several eyes.

“And what is that picture supposed to do?”

“Hmm? It’ll take a while to explain, you know. The Buddhist symbols of Danguma and Ajunya. I’d have to start with Western magicka born from Indian Buddhism.”

“What prattle...”

The man was brimming with composure, but it wasn’t like he’d actually accomplished anything. Those marks at his feet were simply leftover magic circles from his bluff attempt. There was nothing to be worried about.

“W-Wait a sec! After all that talk, nothing is really different, right?! What’re you doing?!”

“...Even *you* don’t believe me? This is outta your area of

expertise, so just put a lid on it.”

“But...”



“Look. Then how 'bout this?”

The moment the man spoke, a cold light suddenly rushed out. It was the man's magic. Despite knowing that it wouldn't work, that it would only beget the same outcome, he was a one-trick pony. His magic would never hit. Or at least, it shouldn't have.

“Guuuh! Wh-What the...?”

Betraying all his expectation, the light pierced through Vuishta's shoulder. The shock of being struck by magic and a sharp pain ran through him.

“You see? It hit, didn't it?”

“You're kidding... So that magic earlier was for this?”

“B-Bastard, just what did you...”

“Demon General Vuishta. You falsified the location you were occupying. However, as long as this eye of Danguma is open in the physical world, you can't do that. The vision of your body that we see here, or the secondary one you're swapping out with, will be completely exposed.”

“Ridiculous! My true body can't be struck with magic just because of some picture! My body is already always in the realm of the dead!”

“Huh? Always in the realm of the dead? Don't go spouting such nonsense, you fucking nitwit. You're just riding a liminal line to make your existence ambiguous. Despite using the damn technique yourself, you don't even know how it works? It's not like your body is in a faraway place.”

“An attack from here couldn't possibly...”

“No, it really can't reach you. But your understanding of the whole thing is still all kinds of messed up. Each and every time you attack or defend, you're shifting between phases. The truly supernatural skill of being able to attack from across different phases is something only someone like Kudrack could pull off. In short, you're only hiding your body a little bit.”

“Wha...?!”

It was a shock. This man could see through portions of the technique that Vuishta knew nothing about.

“H-However, just because you have seen through this technique does not mean I have lost!”

“But the fact that I can hit you now is quite serious, isn't it?”

asked the hero.

She'd been quiet all this time, but now unfurled her bloodlust again. It was like the start of the fight all over again. No, she was overflowing with even more spirit than before.

"Shut it, you stupid little girl!"

As Vuishta gathered his evil power and fired a magic bullet, the man responded in kind and shot forward his light magic. The two magics crossed each other in the space between Vuishta and the hero. Using his evil aura, Vuishta deployed his defensive wall, and the man's magic vanished when it hit.

But the man also blocked Vuishta's attack with a barrier of his own. A golden magic circle floating in the sky deployed before him like a shield. Suddenly, the hero pointed her gaze towards that man.

"Yakagi."

"What, was it none of my business?"

"Um, that's not it but..."

Seeming to have grasped her feelings after she had hesitated to speak, the man let out a sigh like he was resigning himself.

"Fine. The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani is a sword that cuts down the evil that haunts the world. Go ahead and thoroughly show that guy those sword techniques that have been polished for five hundred years."

The hero resolutely nodded at his fearless statement. She then pointed her sword towards Vuishta, and came charging in with a sweeping strike.

"HAAAAAAA!"

"Don't underestimate MEEEEEE!"

The moment he thought he had caught her in his sights, she suddenly vanished, and a horizontal slash was coming from his side. She was fighting while remaining out of his field of vision. It was also clear that her movements were much sharper than before. However...

"All that means is that I just have to evade! I've already seen through your sword!"

Even if her sword was no longer clouded, even if it was now perfectly clear, there was no way her blade would strike him. Vuishta had seen through the hero. Her technique was obvious to him. Whenever she slashed out at him, her blade glittered quite clearly, after all. Even if the hero herself vanished from his field of vision, the light from her blade drew a distinct line in the air and

told him where she was attacking from. Just like when the fighting started, all he had to do was dodge it. Nothing more.

It seemed the foolish hero had yet to realize all this. She simply continued to straightforwardly attack him. And just like before, all he had to do was toy with her until her power faded.

“Ugh, I can’t hit him...”

“That’s right! Even if I can’t use my technique to make your sword strikes pass through me, you can’t hit me! You will never be able to!”

“...”

Seeing the hero fall silent, Vuishta’s joy leaked out in a laugh. Watching his enemy who had heated up with passion bite her lip in powerlessness brought him unbearable levels of ecstasy.

“Heh... AHAHAHAHAHAHA! After I defeat this stupid little girl of a hero, next is you, you damn brat!”

After the hero would be that man in black clothes. There was no way he would let anyone who saw through his technique live. And after being so insulted, Vuishta would make his death a painful one.

On the other hand, something was wrong with the hero. In complete contrast to how she was moving around non-stop while attacking him just moments ago, she now stood there quietly with her sword in position. Her sword was pointed right at his eyes and the hilt of her sword was just a little lower than her chest. He didn’t know what she was planning, but the flicker of her blade would give her away. The moonlight reflecting off her sword told him... Wait, the moonlight?

“Huh—?”

It was gone. The glittering that was supposed to show him her next move had abruptly vanished. And just as he lost sight of her sword, he could hear a woman’s voice coming from somewhere in front of him.

“The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, the Hazy Cross.”

Her spirit was sharper than the crisp, cold night. While the hero’s awe-inspiring voice echoed in his eardrums, Vuishta found himself lying face-up on the ground. He craned his neck to see in the darkness, but he could hardly see anything as his own body was cut into quarters. Before he could even scream, a gasp of doubt escaped his lips.

“H-How...”

How did she do this? Just what had happened...?

“On the night of a new moon, never compete against a swordsman. As I’d expect from my father... I truly, honest to god, tip my hat to him.”

The man in black clothes looked up at the sky as the night wind began to blow. He spoke almost as if he was reading Vuishta’s thoughts. His voice was somewhat nostalgic, yet happy. He then looked at Vuishta with a smile. It was just like the one he’d frequently seen Demon Lord Nakshatra make when things were playing out in the palm of their hands.



“Ridiculous... The moon is thin tonight, but there should still be moonlight...”

“You think?”

At the man’s ridiculing comment, Vuishta looked up at the sky. However, the shining crescent moon...

“It... Is isn’t there...?!”

As if the moon had never existed, the night sky was pitch black. There wasn’t even a single star to be seen.

“Hunt the Moon. The moon is a mirror that reflects all truth in the solar system. Everything under the light of the moon is made clear by its brilliance. Everything in its light becomes honest. Therefore, I hunted it from the sky.”

Vuishta could not understand what that man was saying. It was like he was reciting a poem. However, that black-clad man simply shrugged his shoulders at Vuishta’s bewilderment.

“Well, I said it in quite an exaggerated way, but this isn’t even the same solar system as Earth’s, and I don’t even know if there’s the ninety degree spectrum here. That was all just consolation, but... it still spells death for you, doesn’t it?”

The shining red eyes that looked down at Vuishta were more ominous than even Demon Lord Nakshatra’s as the man spoke in a voice so cold it made Vuishta shudder. Though it was far too late, he realized that this man was a god of death.

“Bastard... You knew that I had captured the light reflecting off her sword.”

“You said yourself that you saw through everything. And just like that, your eyes were always focused on Hatsumi’s big ol’ sword. I expected as much, and played off of that. Well, if her sword were made from the naturally brilliant orichalcos, it might have been a different story. But it’s your loss for being so captivated by her killing intent.”

His words mercilessly rang through the nighttime forest. And then, the man once more tapped the ground with his black shoe. As he did, Vuishta realized something was out of place. If the moon was not shining down on them, then their surroundings should have been completely dark. He shouldn’t have been able to see. But things were plainly illuminated by the light from the pictures at the man’s feet.

“It just means that the dazzling light that reveals the truth can also hide a lie. That’s all.”

“If... only you... weren’t here...”

“I wonder... There could be other techniques that could capture your real body and Hatsumi could have done something about it at the eleventh hour. Also, that sword skill just now... You got cut down because you didn’t properly measure the distance, right? You could have been chopped up before you knew what hit you.”

The man boasted that Vuishta’s chances at victory were basically nonexistent in the first place.

“Well, if you were at least as strong as Rajas, you may have defeated us, but it seems you’re really pretty lacking in the basics.”

As the man spoke like he was remembering something, an impossible shudder passed through Vuishta’s body.

“Bastard, it couldn’t be...”

The man smirked like a brat who’d been caught playing a prank and let out a light laugh.

Then this man... He was the one to cut down the demon general who was chosen to make the first move as the vanguard of the demon army.

“Reiji was the one to defeat Rajas. Let’s leave it at that, and have you kick the bucket right here.”

The man’s teasing voice was the last thing Demon General Vuishta would ever hear.

Epilogue

By Kuchiba Hatsumi's hand, Vuishta was severed from his right collar to his left thigh, and from his left flank to his right armpit. The Hazy Cross of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani. If he remembered correctly, it was supposed to be a phantom strike that cut from the collar to the waist, and then a physical strike that transformed into one from the waist to the collar. And Vuishta ate both of them. In other words, even if one could see the sword technique, there was a high probability of a target taking at least one of the slashes.

"With that, the moon hunt was completely unneeded meddling, huh?"

"Seriously. But there's no doubting the fact that I was able to take him down with absolute certainty thanks to your help."

Hatsumi replied as she let out a long sigh. The moonlight that revealed her sword's movements would become like a heat haze when she used her technique—hard to discern at best. She concluded that Vuishta would be unable to read it. It was an ingenious hand for her to play, and may have been the single strike she was confident would bring about certain death. It may have been a decision she made that would bring about an end to the fight, but...

"If you have amnesia, how can you do that kinda thing?"

"I don't want to hear it from you. Even if you were alone, you could have defeated him while laughing scornfully all the while, no?"

"That's overestimating me a bit too much. I had a vanguard, so that made things easy on me. If I was on my own, it wouldn't have gone like that."

"I wonder about that. Rather, from the very beginning of the fight, frankly speaking, you were quite shady."

"Occupational hazard."

In response to being called shady, Suimei gave a rather gracious reply. Magicians were fundamentally suspicious people. They'd act

foolish, shady, and mysterious. In that sense, they were terrible. However, Hatsumi didn't care about any of that. She just looked at him suspiciously with half-closed eyes.

"If you came up in a story of heroes, then you would be the type who showed up as an ally but was actually the secret boss."

"The kind that you can't beat without getting dragged along by them, huh? Certainly, I fit the mold of the shady guy who appears perfect at first."

Suimei shrugged his shoulders as he laughed, and Hatsumi gave him an exasperated smile.

"You sure are composed."

"Well, thanks to you."

Hatsumi seemed to have relaxed quite a bit. And in the midst of their frank exchange, she spoke up like she suddenly remembered something.

"Now that I think about it, you said something about it earlier, but you fought a man like him once?"

"Well... Yeah. It was a guy who used magicka in a similar way to make location of his real body ambiguous. Actually, it was too similar..."

Suimei's face clouded over as he trailed off. He was remembering an unpleasant battle. One that reminded him of his own worthlessness.

"Hmm. Could it be that guy is also here?"

"Don't be stupid. That's impossible."

"That's what I thought about you at first. I don't think you can outright deny it without thinking about it..."

"Nope, that can't be. It really can't."

As he repeatedly denied her, Hatsumi grew a bit irritated, but she calmed down after seeing Suimei's expression. His face as he kept saying it wasn't possible was grim and filled with anxiety. He then looked up at the moon and said something unexpected.

"The Greed of Ten, Kudrack the Ghosthide. That's the name of the man who used that magicka."

It was quite some time ago Suimei had fought him. It was after Hydemary became his assistant and after he became acquainted with Isrina. He was using modern magicka, living for the ideals of the Society... And Kudrack was the man who'd betrayed all that.

He was a magician who killed others, and did not loathe making the mysteries known to the entire world. But because those

who were released from death could not be stopped by anyone, his criminal record piled up completely unchallenged over the span of a half century. But he began planning something. Something far too nefarious. And so several organizations of magicians sent in agents to subjugate him. Suimei was one of them.

“I was the one who obliterated him. Even if he was a lich, he can’t exist after having his roots severed. But even if I screwed up and he survived, just who would have summoned that man here? Besides, I can’t see any reason for that man to team up with the demons. He was an extreme asshole who thought that all living creatures would find the best salvation by dying and returning to the earth, you know? That kinda asshole...”

There’s no way he’d survived. But just the thought of it sent goosebumps down Suimei’s skin. He wasn’t sure how Hatsumi had taken what he said, but she made a strangely convincing statement.

“If everything is destroyed by the demons, it may end up like that.”

“I’m begging you, don’t say that again... It’ll seriously turn into reality.”

“Was he that strong?”

“Only about a million times stronger than the guy we just beat up. Maybe even ten million. If we had to go up against him, it would be simpler to take on all the demons, demon generals and the Demon Lord all at once. Aaah, I feel like puking.”

She wasn’t sure if he was fooling around, but Suimei went pale as he slumped his shoulders. Not knowing the circumstances at all, Hatsumi spoke like it wasn’t a problem in the least.

“But you defeated him, right?”

“I did. It’s ’cause the world’s number one shittiest enemy was an ally at the time. If that wasn’t the case, I would’ve been cut into mincemeat by those phase blades.”

At the time, the man who was his ally for the moment was the man who’d laughed at his dreams. Then same one he’d mentioned when saving Lefille.

“I don’t wanna go through it a second time. If that guy is alive, before the demons could annihilate humanity, he’d do it with pleasure.”

Hatsumi then questioned him in a puzzled tone.

“Is our world... that dangerous a place?”

“Not at all. It’s so peaceful it’ll bore you to death.”

“Then why is it...?”

“Who knows? The reason the balance between danger and peace became so weird just shows how far into the end of days we are. I don’t know if we’re racing towards the end because we’re trying to fight it or because that’s just the natural course of things, but I really can’t laugh about the possibility of the world ending before we even make it back.”

“It’s not really the time to be saving another world, huh?”

“Even if you say that, no matter what we do, when it ends, it ends. We’re not heroes in our world. About all we can do is tremble in our houses as we count out our remaining days.”

After letting out a sigh like this was no laughing matter, Suimei mimicked the movements of a soldier doing a complete about face accurately and turned towards the ruins.

“Well, setting that aside, I’m going to go ahead and continue my investigation.”

Putting all of his concerns aside for the time, he seemed completely refreshed. Suimei happily walked back over to the remains of the stones where the magicka circle was drawn. Hatsumi followed after him with light steps. But before she reached him she stopped in her tracks. She sensed something terrible.

“Hey, Yakagi...”

“So it isn’t over yet?”

As if replying to Hatsumi’s warning, Suimei sighed like it was getting tedious. Just how much more was he supposed to put off his investigation? That presence that was wriggling about within the darkness of the forest was, without a doubt, the remnants of the demons.

The two of them faced the direction the demons would likely be coming from and waited. Between the darkwood trees in front of them, they could see the darkness opening up. Anticipating that they would be the point of attack, Hatsumi shouldered her sword and Suimei prepared his magicka.

Before long, the demons showed themselves. In the darkness, one figure followed another in a long line. They didn’t quite number as much as they did when they were surrounded earlier, but they were in position to charge in all at once and were brimming with bloodlust.

“It’ll be a series of battles. You think you can manage?”

“Don’t be stupid. I won’t lose to some small fries.”

Though he spoke in a lighthearted manner, Suimei was not smiling. Even though she didn't think that Suimei's manner of speaking was haughty, he looked deadly serious. But in the moment it came down to attack or be attacked, a shadow suddenly fell down from directly above the demons.

They didn't have any time to wonder what had just appeared. Only Hatsumi's puzzled gasp rang out in the clearing, for the demons had been struck down in an instant from above by a shockwave. They, along with the ground and trees, were blown away.

A few trailing at the very end of the line remained, but they were some distance from Suimei and Hatsumi. Riding the shockwave, huge rocks and splinters of trees were sailing at them.

"Wh-What is this?"

"..."

While gripped by confusion, Hatsumi held her sword forward while Suimei used magicka to repel the debris that was flying towards them at a murderous speed. As the thunderous roar settled, a man with silver horns growing out of his head, wearing clothing similar to traditional Japanese attire appeared. With his fist planted in the ground in the center of the dead demons, he announced himself with a complaint.

"How fragile. To think these pests worse than shit could threaten all that live under the Goddess. I don't know who said it, but it's such a bad joke it sends shivers running down my spine."

It was almost like he was talking to himself. Perhaps he was only spitting at the demons at his feet. Eventually, the other demons noticed the unexpected visitor, and lunged at the man with their horns from the sides. However, he brushed them away with the back of his fist, and the demons were smashed up along with the darkwood trees they flew into.

Suimei and Hatsumi were at a loss for words at this overwhelming display of power.

It was fine that he was blowing away the demons. It wasn't like they couldn't have done it themselves, however. But this man moved like he was just swatting away a fly. It was incomprehensible that even the sturdy darkwood trees could be smashed to pieces like that. The man shook his hand like he had just touched something dirty, and suddenly, his gaze was fixed on Suimei.

“...Ugh!”

Suimei’s heart leaped with a single strong thud. His body was seized with fear. It was because he’d seen such overwhelming strength. No, it wasn’t the man’s strength. It was his mere existence. His very gaze. Unexpectedly, one of Suimei’s feet took a step back in retreat. He was moving on sheer instinct.

Ever since coming to this world, Suimei hadn’t experienced anything like this. On the other hand, Hatsumi remained unaware of the crisis that was approaching them. Perhaps she judged that an ally had appeared. She was only looking at the man with silver horns in wonder.

“The hero and... Oh? Are you one of her companions?”

Suimei was unable to answer his question. Alarm bells were clanging nonstop inside his head. Other than the internal screams telling him to run away, he could barely hear anything. Meanwhile, Hatsumi stepped forward to answer him.

“Just who are you? Why do you know that I’m here? An ally?”

“I wonder. That depends on you.”

“What do you mean?”

Those intentionally perplexing words, Hatsumi’s puzzled voice... Suimei heard none of it. Then it finally set in on him just what he was standing before.

“Are you... a dragon?”

Perhaps because Suimei’s trembling question was on the mark, the man’s mouth warped into a smile. Sensing the change that had come over Suimei, Hatsumi gave him a quizzical look.

“Yakagi...?”

“As I thought...”

“Bastard, you seem quite frightened. I can’t approve of a man who can’t at least bluff before his enemy.”

“Sh-Shut up! This is a normal reaction!”

“However, I don’t have any business with a scared weakling. Sorry, but I’ll have you vanish.”

As if concluding that Suimei was boring, the man pierced him with a cold gaze. And then he slightly opened his mouth, and began sucking in air.

A dragon’s roar.

The moment Suimei sensed it, the tension that was binding his body and the trembling that shook him vanished. The only thing occupying his mind was evading the menace before him. Hatsumi

had no clue what was about to happen, and stepped forward with her sword at the ready as if to protect him. And Suimei strongly grabbed her shoulder.

“Hatsumi! Come here!”

“Huh?”

“Behind me! Quickly! You’ll get swallowed by the dragon’s roar!”

“Dragon’s r... Kyah?!”

Suimei pulled the bewildered Hatsumi behind him forcefully, and thrust both his hands forwards as he began chanting.

“Mea aegis non est aegis. Prae omni oppugnatione est solida. Prae omni impetu est invicta. Invincibilis, immobilis, immortalis. Id est ardens aureum castrum ut colligit spiritus astorum. Eius nomen est—”

[My shield is not a shield. It is sturdy before any and all offense. It is unshakable before any and all attacks. Invincible, immobile, imperishable. It is the shining golden castle which collects the breath of the stars. Its name is—]

Along with the mana Suimei was letting out, many golden magicka circles were deploying around the two of them. The magicka circles to the front were revolving, the large magicka circle at their feet had a needle etched in which was counting the seconds like a clock. As Suimei’s six-verse chant came to an end, all of the magicka circles stabilized.

“Mea firma aegis! Speciosum aureum magnale!”

[My firm shield! The brilliant golden fortress!]

As Suimei let out his keyword, the man with horns released a high pitched grating sound from his mouth which shook the air. Just as the wave of oscillations spread into their surroundings, the ground was astir like it was boiling, and fissures resembling red lightning were flickering in the air. The air was electrified as the molecules were agitated. Within that illusion of the world being thrown into a bright red plasma ball, everything was transformed into a red hot mass.

Between the flickering flashes, everything in their vision was dyed red, and eventually the earth, the darkwood trees, the corpses of the demons, the summoning ruins, anything and everything was equally swallowed up in an explosion.

That thunderous roar and the whirlwind of incandescence could be mistaken for a small scale solar flare. The still night had fallen

into a burning hell. If the dust explosion Suimei created could be described as dynamite, this was more like a nuclear explosion.

Eventually, the flames settled down, and the scenery around them completely changed.

“This... is...”

Hatsumi was gazing around in wonderment. She wasn't even able to grasp what had just happened. The darkwood trees and the ruins were completely blown away together with the ashes. All that remained was the upturned dirt on the ground and a slew of burning embers.

On the other hand, the man with horns, for some reason, opened his mouth wide completely unexpectedly. For a while, he only looked at Suimei in a complete daze. As Suimei wondered what he was up to, the man with horns suddenly began laughing like a fire had been ignited in him.

“Pfft, AHAHAHAHAHA! Ha... to think you would endure that head on! I always thought it was something that a mere human could never defend against, but my goodness, what a fool I was! Bravo! Bravo!”

He certainly sounded happy. After laughing for a while, he gazed at Suimei fanatically. In spite of focusing entirely on the hero before, he didn't spare her even a glance now. He was only staring at Suimei like he was scrutinizing a sword of the finest quality. And then...

“Man in black. Bastard— No, I take back calling you a weakling. Calling a man who steps forward to protect a woman a weakling, whatever the case may be, is simply not the truth. Besides, you endured that without a single scratch too, the reason for your trembling was not simple fear was it?”

This time, the man smiled as he bared his fangs. It was just like a starving beast who had finally found its prey—a terrifying and ferocious smile. Just his joy from anticipating that meal conjured Suimei's fear again. Now that he was once more reduced to quivering, Hatsumi questioned the man again.

“You're...”

“Hmm? Ooh! That's right. I completely forgot. My goodness, to think I have a duty to perform after finding such a superb trophy. The whims of the world are truly something. However—”

He was speaking as if he just remembered what he was doing. No, that man seriously may have completely forgotten about

Hatsumi.

“I am the dragonnewt Eanru. Hero of the Alliance, Hatsumi, regardless of whether you consent or not, I will have you come with me this evening.”

Eanru flashed his draconic fangs in the moonlight.

Afterword

Everybody, it has been a long time. This is Gamei Hitsuji.

The story this time around is the Saadiaz Alliance arc. From the Empire, Suimei's party has now gone into Alliance territory to decipher the magicka circle behind the hero summoning ritual. Meanwhile, we meet the third hero—the hero of Miazen!

As luck would have it, this is Suimei's childhood friend Hatsumi-chan's debut. The story is gradually moving forwards, so I do hope that you enjoy it. Suimei-kun's journey that just won't go his way at all is the main focus of the battle this time around. And then, in the end...

I would love it if you enjoy this volume.

Allow me to once more thank each and every one of you who helped bring volume 5 out into the world. To the chief editor S-sama; the illustrator himesuz-sama; the designer Horiehideaki-sama; and the proofreading company Oraido-sama, truly, thank you very much.

-Gamei Hitsuji

Bonus Short Stories

The Temptation of Salted Seaweed Chips

One day, as Felmenia happened to walk by the kitchen, she caught a glimpse of the unusual sight of Suimei working at the sink.

“Suimei-dono? What might you be doing in the kitchen?”

“There’s something in particular I had a hankering for. While I was at the market today, I spotted something similar to something we have in the world I come from. So, well... After seeing that, I wanted to try making some, and ended up buying all the ingredients for it.”

What Suimei had found was sea lettuce—in other words, a precursor to dried seaweed. After seeing it, he thought that he might be able to try making a certain something himself, and bought the ingredients to give it a go. And with a little experimenting in the kitchen, he managed to succeed in spades. He now had homemade dried seaweed.

“Oh? But if I remember correctly, you said you could only do simple cooking, Suimei-dono...”

“Yeah. Lucky me, this here is pretty simple. It’s basically just frying these.”

Suimei looked down at the other ingredients spread out before him—potatoes with their eyes already removed.

“Heh heh heh, my blade is invisibly made... It peels potatoes and reduces them to nice, thin slices!”

Letting out a creepy laugh and weaving together an idiotic chant, Suimei put his magicka to culinary use. In short order, the potatoes in the sink were all rendered into thin slivers. Watching on in horror, Felmenia called out to him.

“What are you doing, Suimei-dono?!”

“What? I’m just slicing the potatoes.”

“S-Slicing?! Why are you being so wasteful, reducing them to paper like that?!”

“Uh, to eat them?”

With that, Suimei tossed the sliced potatoes into the heated oil he'd prepared.

"Are you frying them like that?"

"Yup."

"Would it not be tastier to fry them whole so that they come out soft and flaky?"

"That's an option, sure. But this is also quite tasty."

"I see..."

With the grimace on her face, Felmenia's consternation was obvious. She'd likely never had potato chips before, so trying one for the first time would be a surprise. After shaking off the excess oil from the freshly fried chips out of the pan, Suimei sprinkled salt and dried seaweed over them.

"Now they're done. These are salted seaweed chips. Go ahead and try one."

Even after receiving the finishing touches, the fresh potato chips were still steaming ever so slightly. Felmenia timidly stretched out her hand, took one, and popped it into her mouth. There was an audible, appetizing crunch, and Felmenia's expression quickly changed from skepticism to admiration.

"I-It's delicious! This is a potato revolution!"

"Right?"

"Yes!"

With Felmenia's enthusiastic approval, Suimei got to frying up the rest of the potatoes. All the while, he could hear the gratifying sound of one chip being crunched down on after another.

"The texture is so crisp, and the flavorful fragrance is... from this green powder?"

"Yup. That's the dried seaweed. It's made by dehydrating sea—Wait, where did half of the chips go?!"

The next he turned around, half of the mountain of salted seaweed chips he'd just fried up had already been demolished.

"Ah, s-sorry! They were so delicious that I just..."

"W-Well, there're still more potatoes, so it's fine. If you like them that much, you can take these to the living room."

"Thank you for the treat!"

Felmenia happily absconded with the rest of the salted seaweed chips. Once she was gone, Suimei started his work anew. And once he was all done slicing the potatoes with magicka and frying them in the heated oil...

“Suimei-kun.”

“Whoa! You were there, Lefi?!”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Suimei was startled by Lefille seeming to appear behind him from out of nowhere, but she sounded irritated. Just what was going on with her? From the look of it, Suimei thought she seemed restless.

“Suimei-kun.”

“Wh-What’s going on? You’re kinda scary, you know?”

“That’s just your imagination. You don’t need to be so on edge. So? Are they done?”

As she spoke, Lefille was eyeing the plate of freshly fried chips.

“Hmm? W-Well, yeah...”

“Alright!”

Lefille pumped her fist in the air in some sort of triumphant gesture.

“I mean, I still have to fry up the rest of them...” said Suimei.

“Then there’s no need to worry. I will help you out here and carry these to the living room.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry. You can just keep cooking away.”

After their rather one-sided conversation, Suimei more or less figured out what was going on. Lefille must have had some of the previous batch and, unable to stand it any longer, came to the kitchen to see when more would be ready.

“Then take that towel to wipe off your hands. It’s kinda gross to get them all sticky and oily from the plate, right?”

“Ah, yes, thank you. That’s certainly true... Huh?!”

“What?”

“I-It’s nothing... Mm, these seaweed chips or whatever sure are tasty. Mm...”

After staring for a bit, she walked off carrying the plate somewhat awkwardly. Moments later, Suimei could hear the cheers of joy from the living room.

Thinking to himself that he’d now have to use all the ingredients he had to get any chips for himself, Suimei once more returned to slicing and frying the potatoes. After a while, he suddenly realized that someone was standing behind him again.

“Suimei...”

“Huh, this time it’s you, Liliana? What’s up?”

"Have you finished... more of those 'see-we'd ships' yet?"

"They're seaweed chips... But you know about these too, huh?"

"No, um... I just thought... I would help carry them."

"You've got seaweed flecks on your face."

"I-I... already wiped them off!"

Liliana took out a handkerchief and immediately began wiping her face with it. But when she looked down at it, there wasn't a single fleck of seaweed to be seen.

"...?"

"I was lying."

"Suimei... that's mean. You're the worst... I ought to bring slander charges... against you."

Liliana directed a reproachful gaze at Suimei, and with that, Suimei handed her the fresh plate of potato chips.

"Then consider this an apology—"

"Thank you. I'll take them... right away."

Liliana didn't even wait for Suimei to finish his sentence before taking the plate and a pitcher of grape juice back to the living room. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing. And moments later, cheerful voices could again be heard coming from the living room. It was nice that they were all delighted, but...

"I don't care if you have some, but leave some for me, damn it..."

In the end, Suimei wouldn't be that lucky.

Further Developments After the Resolution of the Incident

A few days after the coma incidents in the imperial capital were resolved, Graziella Filas Rieseld was headed towards the northern plaza of the city. There she would find the mastermind behind the incidents—an elf named Romeon. Or, at least, part of him. Because of the chaos he wrought in the capital for nearly a month, as an unprecedented warning to the people, his head was put on public display.

Although, because it was pitch black, it wasn't really clear at a glance whether it was a head or not. It has been several days now, but there was hardly a sign of rot on the severed head. Not even a single fly circled it. It was utterly bizarre to behold, and gave a glimpse of just how thoroughly corrupted the man known as

Romeon had really become.

"The power of darkness, was it?" Graziella muttered to herself, reflecting on the real source of the problem.

Magic that held the power of darkness had been loathed and detested since ancient times. But to think this man had met such a cruel end because of it was outside the range of anything Graziella had expected.

The object resembling a head looked like it had been painted a repulsive black, but there was something indescribable about it that made it difficult to look away. Graziella felt like her eyes were being drawn to it. Like she was being sucked in. Beckoned by that strange, dark power, Graziella slowly and steadily began to stretch out her hand.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. That there is something humans should never touch upon."

Just as it became uncertain whether she would continue to reach out her hand or retract it, a voice of restraint called out to her. When she turned around, she spotted the figure of the summoned hero of El Meide, Elliot Austin. In response to his tone, which didn't contain an ounce of courtesy, she shot a reproachful look his way. Elliot then took a bow.

"It is wonderful to see you well, Your Imperial Highness, Third Princess Graziella Filas Rieseld."

"El Meide's hero, is it? Did you also come to see this damned thing?"

"Yes."

"It seems that attendant of yours isn't with you today."

"Christa is currently in the middle of finishing some business at the church. You could say I got a little bored."

"I see."

Keeping her greeting short, Graziella looked back towards Romeon's head.

"Now, what did you mean by saying this is something that should never be touched upon?"

"As a mage, I do believe that you should already understand, Your Imperial Highness."

"Unfortunately, this is my first time seeing such a thing... Have you seen it before yourself, bastard?"

At Graziella's question, Elliot narrowed his eyes as he looked at the head.

"I have... seen something similar just once before."

"Oh?"

"It's just... what I saw was something that was directly summoned."

That was most interesting. Since Suimei had said nothing more other than that this would be the end of days for those swallowed by darkness, Graziella still had plenty of questions. There was still much she didn't know.

"Hmph, and what was this thing that was directly summoned?"

"Let's skip the long explanation. To put it simply, it was a mass of malice. It scattered violence, and any and all who approached it were promptly desecrated and driven to madness. It was a dangerous foe indeed."

Saying that, Elliot looked to the sky. Was he recalling that fateful encounter as he cast his gaze upward? After a moment of silence, he spoke in a deeply emotive voice.

"Because it was an absolute mystery, many masters were brought together to strike it down."

"So it was defeated?"

"In the end. But because we had to guarantee our own safety, it was largely done through brute force."

Elliot spoke in a self-deprecating tone. But since she had faced him in combat before, Graziella had an idea of Elliot's true strength. She knew he was powerful, and didn't think he was just being humble right now.

"If you defeated the unknown without any casualties, then I do believe it was a victory to your credit."

"But that man managed somehow or another to do it on his own, you know?"

"I heard that Colonel Rogue was also there."

"Even so, it was still just two people, right? There were about a hundred of us when it happened. Besides, even if Colonel Rogue was there, it was still probably that man who defeated it."

"So you're acknowledging his value, are you?"

"I believe all I need to acknowledge is his true ability."

It seemed like he was saying there was more to Suimei than he wasn't willing to acknowledge. But after those last few sarcastic words, Elliot suddenly let out a sigh and turned towards Graziella.

"Did you know? Back when you had your match with him at the plaza, that he was already wounded?"

"I heard after the fact that he was wounded while searching for the culprit before he accepted his duel with me. What about it?"

In answer to Graziella's question, Elliot pointed his gaze at the blackened head and stiffened his expression.

"It is likely that that man had two battles with such a thing. When he defeated the culprit that was swallowed by malice, and also on that evening Liliana-chan ran away. It was immediately before we came running over. What he faced that night was likely a diluted version of it."

"From the sound of it, you didn't actually see it for yourself."

"But I still believe it to be the case. The fact that he sustained such wounds must mean that he faced off against something at least that powerful."

"What if he simply fought against Liliana Zandyke?"

"As a mage, that man is on a different level. If he fought to the full extent of his power, she likely wouldn't have been much of an opponent. Moreover, if a child like her carried such strong malice within her body, she would have already ended up like this."

Graziella looked to Romeon's head.

"Do you know what damned wiles he used to defeat this thing?"

"Not at all. In terms of magic, he is a fair bit ahead, after all. I can't say for certain how this thing was defeated, but..."

"You have some sort of idea about it?"

"Probably. At the very least, it held the breath of the stars."

"The breath of the stars?"

"The power held by the star that we reside on. In other words, of the very land itself. It rejects all that should not be in the world, and manifests incredible power against anything that would do this world harm. To put it simply, it is a purifying power near equal in terms of holy power."

As Elliot explained, his brow wrinkled like he found his own explanation troubling.

"In my world, such power can only be used by saints. So I wonder why a mage can use it..."

Indeed, he was grumbling to himself because the matter was rather perplexing to him.

"That man, compared to Astel's hero..."

"He is likely much stronger. So much so that they're hardly worth comparing. The amount of mana he possesses and the

experience he has are both unreasonable.”

Hearing Elliot’s reply, Graziella scoffed like she was thoroughly unamused.

“Nevertheless, I declared that I would pay him back.”

And in response to that, with a broad grin, Elliot simply replied...

“It probably won’t be so easy, huh?”

Everyone’s Tiny?!

One day while Suimei was working in the living room, a voice suddenly called to him from behind. It was Lefille. For some reason, however, she sounded much higher-pitched than normal.

“Suimei-kun, do you have a minute?”

“What’s up, Lef— Huh, what?! What’s going on?!”

Turning around to look at her, Suimei was caught by surprise. But that was a perfectly understandable reaction. After all, just like when she had used too much of her spirit power, Lefille had once more become tiny.

“You returned to your original form earlier, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but before I knew it, I shrank again. It’s quite an inconvenience.”

“Hmm... Even if you get back on the circle, you won’t go back to normal right away, either... So, what do you need?”

“Yes, well, there’s something that I want from the shelf, but I can’t reach it. Can you get it for me?”

Certainly, considering her current height, there was no way she could possibly reach the higher shelves. She could probably get to some of them with a chair, but if she’d come to Suimei, it likely meant that what she needed was on the very top shelf. It was around then that Liliana entered the room.

“What’s wrong... you two?”

“Oh, Lefille shrank, so she can’t reach what she wants anymore.”

“I was just asking Suimei-kun for help.”

“Is... that so?”

“Indeed. So, Suimei-kun...”

Her imploring gaze begged him “please.” Suimei looked down at what he was currently holding in his hands.

“Sorry, I can’t really put this down right now. It’ll take some

time, so please have Felmenia get it for you instead.”

“Lady Felmenia?”

“Yeah. Hey, Menia!”

Suimei called out for Felmenia, who was in the kitchen. And as he did, Lefille gave him a puzzled look.

“What are you doing, Suimei-kun?”

“Hmm?”

“Felmenia can’t reach the shelf either.”

“You’re joking, right? I mean, I know that Felmenia is a little shorter than me and you in your true form, but...”

If she had something to stand on, there was no way she couldn’t reach the top shelf. But while Suimei was in the midst of explaining this, Felmenia came over from the kitchen.

“What is the matter, Suimei-dono?”

Her voice too was unusually high-pitched. It sounded childish, even. And when Suimei turned to her with a big question mark over his head...

Indeed, Felmenia was now about the same height as Liliana and the tiny Lefille.

“WHAAAT?!”

“Whatever is the matter?”

“Menia! What’s the matter with you?!”

Suimei was gripped by surprise. In response, Felmenia made a troubled expression.

“My apologies. I have also become smaller.”

“What the...”

How had she shrunk? Why? He hadn’t the faintest idea. There was a reason it happened to Lefille, and absolutely none of that should have applied to Felmenia.

“Did I not tell you?”

“No, I didn’t hear a thing. Not a word.”

Suimei shook his head vigorously and adamantly proclaimed that he was in the dark. With all three girls now petite, the house felt more like a daycare. The adorable pitter-patter of Lefille, Felmenia, and Liliana all running about was as lighthearted as could be, but Suimei’s head felt disproportionately heavy.

“Anyway, that’s how it is,” said Lefille. “So you’re the only one who can get it for me, Suimei-kun.”

“Th-Then have Menia use magicka to get it.”

“Ah!”

“Magicka... you say?”

“I see! I could do that!”

All three girls exclaimed at Suimei’s apparently brilliant idea. How had none of them thought of that? Suimei knew he’d better not ask that out loud. Meanwhile, Lefille and Felmenia scampered over to the shelf. Lefille pointed at what she wanted, and Felmenia began chanting her spell. However...

“HWUH?!”

Towards the end of her chant, just as she was about to speak her keyword and was gesturing overenthusiastically, Felmenia pitched forward in a grand display of unbalanced clumsiness. Suimei was reminded of a similar scene back in Castle Camellia.

“Hnnh... Suimei-donooo... Suimei-dono, please get it for her...”

“Suimei-kun, can you get it after all?”

“It’s your turn... Suimei.”

Felmenia was still on the ground and on the verge of tears, while Lefille looked to be rather troubled. As for Liliana, she simply seemed to be telling Suimei he should just resign himself. What was he supposed to do with little girls multiplying like this? All of a sudden, Suimei’s vision went black.

“Suimei-dono, Suimei-dono!”

“Ngggh...”

Felmenia attempt to rouse Suimei—who had his face down on the table—but he didn’t show a single sign of waking.

“Suimei-dono seems to be fast asleep.”

“He’s making... weird noises.”

“He must be having a bad dream or something.”

While Suimei was groaning in his sleep with a grim expression, the three troubled girls watched over him. Suimei, of course, was rather relieved when he did eventually wake up.

A Sermon at the Dojo?

One day, after finishing his kenjutsu practice, Yakagi Suimei was taking a break on the veranda of the Kuchiba residence. The sun had already set and a refreshing night breeze was blowing against his face.

While lazily sitting on the edge of the wooden veranda in his gi, he fanned himself with the folding fan he had in his breast pocket and gazed at the moon that had gotten big on the horizon. It was

around then that a voice called out to him from further down the veranda.

“Suimei.”

“Hmm?”

His gaze was naturally drawn towards the source of the voice that tinkled like a silver bell, and when he looked, he spotted his childhood friend, Kuchiba Hatsumi. She’d been wearing the same gi he was before, but now she’d changed into comfortable-looking sweats.

“So this is where you were.”

“Yup, right here. I finished up, so I was just taking a little break. After loafing a bit more here, I’ll go on home.”

At that, Hatsumi looked and sounded somewhat dissatisfied.

“It’s not like I came here to tell you to leave. Really, the opposite. It’d be problematic if you just left on your own.”

“Why’s that?”

“Mom said she’s making dinner for five—that means you included.”

“That’s... Sorry ’bout being a bother all the time.”

“Nobody thinks of you as a bother. Truth be told, we’d rather you not be so reserved and come over more often. You’re not eating proper dinners, are you?”

“It’s not like I’m...”

Hatsumi eyed him, looking half self-satisfied and half exasperated. Suimei started to deny her claim, but...

“I bet it’s instant noodles.”

“Ugh...”

“Microwave dinners, mostly curry.”

“Er...”

“Canned mackerel with just salt on it. I could keep going—do you have anything to say for yourself?”

When she gave him an unrelenting scowl, Suimei capitulated. Raising both hands above his head, he admitted his neglect for his own health.

“Sorry, sorry, my bad. I was lying.”

“See? You don’t eat properly on your own after all.”

“It’s not *always* like that, you know? When it’s time to eat, I do so properly.”

“I wonder about that.”

Suimei tried to smooth things over in a fluster, but Hatsumi

remained prickly. It was plain as day that she didn't believe him. But she let it go there. She sat down next to Suimei and changed the subject.

"Suimei, about your training..."

"What about it?"

"You know what. I'm telling you to take it seriously."

So that's what it was. Suimei gave her a bitter smile. However, he had a proper defense on that point.

"I am taking it seriously, you know? Even when it comes to the practicing swings and forms, I'm not holding anything back, you hear?"

"That's true, but... can you really say you're taking your training seriously when you only come to the dojo two or three times a week? Lately, we're lucky if you come by once."

"That's... I thought I told you that I have things to care of. I've been busy."

"Things to take care of...? Is it really something that takes up that much time?"

"That's precisely why I haven't been showing up. Regarding that, Instructor Kiyoshiro already knows what's going on."

"So what are these things? Even when I ask, you never tell me."

"It's a secret."

"That again... Won't you just tell me already?"

"One day."

"That's all you ever say."

With that, Hatsumi puffed out her cheeks in a pout. Normally she was quite serious, but every once in a while, a more childish side would shine through. Suimei thought she might be a little old for that, but because it was so cute, he hesitated in pointing that out. As such thoughts were going through his head, Hatsumi spoke up again in a somewhat disappointed tone with her eyes cast downward.

"At this rate, Suimei, you'll be left behind, you know? Everyone who joined in the beginning has gotten stronger, and even the newer children have been improving."

"Yeah, maybe."

"No, it's not a maybe. Even though you've been here all along, you're the only one who still hasn't reached the intermediate level."

It was exactly as she said. When Hatsumi's father, Kiyoshiro, set up a dojo in the neighborhood, Hatsumi and Suimei were his first

two students. Other children joined on afterward, and as time passed, each and every one of the other students surpassed Suimei with the sword.

Of course, if he abandoned the fundamentals of the Kuchiba school and fought like a magician as he usually did, Suimei likely wouldn't lose in a sword fight with any of the other students. Apart from Kiyoshiro and Hatsumi, he could easily see through the moves of the others and counter them.

But since he couldn't use his magic in a normal fight, he didn't have much to show in the way of results when it came to matches. Suimei now primarily came to the dojo so that he would never forget the basics of the blade. But if he went too far in his training, he would be drawn in by the way of the sword. Both his father, Kazamitsu, and his uncle Kiyoshiro had explained to him in detail that a magician shouldn't become completely absorbed by the sword.

So in that respect, when he thought about it, Hatsumi was right. He wasn't taking his training seriously. She had seen through him.

"Suimei... It's not good for the first student to remain weak, right? It sets a bad example for the others."

"It's fine as long as you're strong, right? You're really the first student."

"I'm the daughter of the dojo's master. That hardly counts."

It didn't seem like Hatsumi was about to change her mind anytime soon. Suimei weakly knit his brow.

"Back then, you used to complain about me being strong. But now you're complaining about me being weak. Which is it, really?"

"That's... Isn't it obvious that it's better if you're strong?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing!"

Suimei couldn't hear her quiet voice. He asked her about it, but she firmly planted her feet on the ground, stood up, and marched off down the veranda. Watching her go, Suimei slumped his shoulders.

"Instructor, isn't it about time that we tell Hatsumi and Haseto the truth...?"

His unheard, idle complaint was directed at Kiyoshiro, who was likely having a quiet drink in the living room.

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Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue: The Third Hero

Chapter 1: To the Saadiah Alliance

Chapter 2: Relation of the Summoned

Chapter 3: On the Evening of the New Moon

Chapter 4: Hunt the Moon

Epilogue

Afterword

Bonus Short Stories

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Copyright



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by Gamei Hitsuji

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